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MONKSFORD
A TALE
OF MUCH TALKING





MONKSFORD

A TALE OF MUCH TALKING

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"WISE AS A SERPENT," "WIFE OR SLAVE," ETC.

"Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment ;
And a babbler is no better."

IN THREE VOLUMES.



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MONKS FORD.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE THUNDERS OF THE CHURCH.

MISS BRADLEY had thought it rather hard the rector should only come in for one brief half-hour on the day of his return, and then go out again, bidding her not sit up, as he might be late—and she with so much to say to him. But when, just as she was coming down to breakfast the following morning, he walked into the house, she felt no surprise. He often went out in the early morning; and never did she suspect he was just returned from an eighteen miles' walk, undertaken in order to gain twelve hours' precious time, and prevent the curiosity of Monksford from ascertaining that Miss Tollmache had been writing letters, the moment she returned home, to half the capitals in Europe, to say nothing of less important places.

“Bless me, Lionel,” she said, as she handed him his

coffee, "how well you are looking! I never saw a man so improved in appearance. How much good the change must have done you. You look ten years younger than when you went away."

"I feel so," he replied.

"But isn't this a sad business about poor Rose Playfair? Well, I always thought her rather a vain silly girl, and her mother a foolish woman. But I declare it makes me quite angry to hear the way people go on."

"How do they go on?"

"Why, Mrs. Tatnell was here yesterday morning, and she told me there'd been quite a large gathering the day before at Mrs. Roberts's, and they're all saying the unkindest things about the poor girl and all the family. Mrs. Collier won't let her girls associate with Playfair's any more; and Mrs. Corbett is going to give up having Doctor Playfair to attend her; and Mrs. Tatnell says she believes it'll end in their being cut by everyone. She's just as bad as anyone herself. You know she hates the Playfairs. We had quite words about it. I told her I thought it was very unchristian conduct. I am sure I feel very sorry for the Playfairs; and if I didn't think they'd rather be left alone, I'd go and see her, poor woman."

Miss Bradley was lenient from various causes. In the first place, all dread of Rose Playfair was removed for ever; in the second place, she had no cause for vicarious jealousy of the girl's pretty face and engaging manners; in the third, she had lived long under the influence of the manly large-hearted Christianity of her cousin. He listened in silence, but

his face grew very dark and stern, and Miss Bradley's disclosures bore fruit ere many hours were over.

The rector had travelled all day, and been out nearly all night, but it never occurred to him that he needed rest in consequence. His tough frame and iron muscles did not often make such demands. He went out directly after breakfast, and in the High Street met first Mr. Octavius Buller, stalking majestically along, in all the delightful consciousness of irreproachable dress and unquestioned respectability.

"Ah, my dear rector, how are you?" he exclaimed, in tones calculated to acquaint anyone within a radius of fifty yards that the great Octavius Buller was welcoming the rector back to Monksford. "Glad to see you back. Uncommonly well you look, too. Sad business this at the Playfairs'!"

"So sad, that I think the less said about it the better."

"Gad, and you're right too, upon my soul. There's no use chattering about things. I suppose they'll leave the place if they can, but I doubt if the poor devil has a sixpence to bless himself with, and that makes moving about difficult. You parsons preach a good deal to us about riches, rector; but, Gad! there's an advantage in being a substantial man."

"A great one, especially to those who possess no other. Good morning, Mr. Buller."

"Hang the fellow!" said Mr. Buller to himself, as he walked on. "I wonder if he had the impudence to mean that for me? If he thinks he's going to bully me, because he has got so thick at the Court, he'll find he's mistaken."

A few yards further on the rector encountered Mr.

Smithson, who greeted him with almost savage delight.

"I'll turn and walk a little way with you," he said. "I never was so glad to see anyone. This is a sad confirmation of all our fears."

"It is, indeed."

"And if anyone can do anything for those poor people, it is you."

"I am not sure. You rate me too highly," he replied, with a wondrous gleam of softness crossing his pale stern face.

"No, I do not. Lawrence, I could foam at the mouth! It's as much as I can do to prevent swearing in the very faces of all these women. You have no idea—"

"Yes, I have. I have heard something of what is going on already."

"I don't know which is worst," he continued vehemently; "the chatter of these malignant scandal-mongers, or the hypocritical cant of the Dysons and their set, about a terrible visitation and an instructive lesson. There's only one thing in which they are all agreed, and that is a total want of all really kind feeling for the sad grief of the poor Playfairs. I wish they were all—choked."

At this very moment, forth from a side street came Mrs. Corbett and Mrs. Collier, fresh from a morning meeting of the committee of the Monksford Soup and Blanket Society; both ladies being addicted to works of charity. Here was an opportunity. Such a scandal could not fail to be distressing to the rector of the parish. Naturally, therefore, the first thing to do was to draw his attention to it. They both greeted

him with much cordiality. Mrs. Corbett took the lead, as became a woman who always spoke her mind, and who was also credited, chiefly perhaps on her own evidence, with being a woman of much intellectual ability.

"Ah, Mr. Lawrence! delighted to see you back. How well you are looking! I never saw a man so improved in appearance. Absence seems to have agreed better with you than with your flock. We have had sad doings since you went away."

"Very sad indeed," he replied very gravely. "I am distressed to hear of a great deal that has happened, and is, I fear, still happening."

The ladies looked surprised, with a dash of hopeful anticipation. Was any fresh excitement to be forthcoming?

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Corbett asked. "I know of nothing distressing save this disgraceful elopement."

"Do you not? I was thinking of the opportunity afforded to my parishioners of manifesting true neighbourly kindness, and of the manner in which I fear it has been met."

Mrs. Corbett drew herself up. She understood now, and prepared for battle. She was not very fond of the rector; none of that section of Monksford society to which she belonged had any great partiality for him. She had never actually measured swords with him before, but she was not thereby daunted. A clever outspoken woman she considered to be a match for any man. Mrs. Collier glanced from one to the other with the sort of awe-stricken feeling with which it is presumable a race

of pigmies would watch a single combat between two giants.

"I do not think," she replied, "that any of the residents in Monksford can be fairly taxed with showing any want of proper feeling on this occasion. I have heard many expressions of pity for the whole family."

"Pity is hardly a suitable feeling, Mrs. Corbett. Has any active sympathy made itself apparent to our poor friends?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Lawrence. The Playfairs were never friends of mine. I never could approve of the proceedings of that house, and I confess to me this catastrophe is no matter for surprise. For the rest, you must excuse me if I remark that there are always two sides to a question. We have our duty to society to consider, as well as our relations towards individual cases. Your position as a clergyman is of course quite different."

"How so?"

"You stand in respect of moral disorders in the same position as doctors stand in respect of physical ones. A doctor's duty is to be wherever dangerous and deadly diseases are most rife; but we should hold it most culpable for ordinary people not to hold carefully aloof from any such cases."

She smiled a little smile of superiority on the rector as she spoke, in the happy conviction that she had given a most complete and strictly logical checkmate to his implied censure.

"What a clever woman she is," murmured Mrs. Collier to herself; and Mr. Smithson gave a side

glance at the rector, noting only that he thought he had never seen his eyes look so dark before.

"Ah, well," he quietly replied, "if you put it in that light, I have nothing more to say. If you are conscious that your own moral condition is such that you dare not run the risk of even the most remote contact with anything evil, you are of course right in holding carefully aloof from even the most distant chance of contagion."

Mrs. Corbett coloured furiously, and, as unfortunately clever outspoken women are apt to do, lost simultaneous command of her temper and her logic.

"Mr. Lawrence, I consider that a most insulting speech."

"By no means, my dear madam, it is only following out your own illustration to its legitimate conclusion."

"It is no such thing; and you must know perfectly well that it is the universally admitted duty of all respectable people to uphold the tone of society, by a stern protest against vice in every shape. Of course it is not for me to teach a clergyman; but I hope I know my Bible as well as most people, and I am sure that I find there abundant authority for avoiding all that is evil."

"Especially sins of the tongue, Mrs. Corbett. You will find them more sternly denounced in Scripture than almost any others. If you avoid them, you will do well."

He passed on as he spoke, warned perhaps by a suppressed chuckle from Mr. Smithson that it would be well to end the colloquy. A few yards further,

at the Court gateway, he paused. "I am going to the Court," he said, "so we must part here."

"Rector!" exclaimed his companion, energetically wringing his hand, "if I was a man of fortune, I would go home and make a will in your favour at once."

The rector smiled rather sadly, and they parted; as did Mrs. Corbett and Mrs. Collier forthwith, the former to recover her equanimity as best she might, the latter to impart to any acquaintance whom she could chance to find, the intelligence of the terrible defeat her dear friend had experienced at the hands of the rector.

"For my part," she proclaimed to every one, "I think he was quite right. I do think Mrs. Corbett's conduct most unchristian. She carries it much too far. For me, of course, the matter is different. I have daughters, and a mother must make her children the first consideration. Were I like her—daughterless, I am sure I would have tried to do all I could for those poor people. I really do begin to think there must be some truth in the story that Rose Playfair refused Ned Corbett; and that his mother is spiteful for that reason."

"I quite agree with you," Mrs. Tatnell said, "and I think Mrs. Corbett grows very overbearing and disagreeable. I am very glad she has been so thoroughly taken down. I quite believe Ned Corbett was refused; and what's more, have very good reason to believe it was on account of his character, which I know is by no means good. I know that their last housemaid—"

The rest was whispered into Mrs. Collier's ear.

“My goodness, you don't say so! and she to be so hard upon the Playfairs! I never knew anything so discreditable.”

Thus it appears that the axiom that no wild animals prey upon their own species, if true in the realm of nature, does not hold good in that of morals.

Lionel Lawrence meanwhile was enjoying the hitherto unknown luxury of discussing the not altogether satisfactory virtuous manifestations of his flock with a second self.

“People prate about the peaceful serenity of a clergyman's life,” he said. “These are its true incidents. For some eight years I have striven to infuse into these people a healthy vigorous moral tone of feeling. Here comes an opportunity of testing with what success; and behold!”

“The wind bags explode, and are found to be full of poisonous gas. Poor old fellow! it is hard, but I suppose inevitable. And just think, if your theories were universally carried out, what a terrible thing it would be! What would become of society, if chastisement fell upon the eligible and richly endowed guilty, instead of on the useless and rather obstructive innocent? Think of society being obliged to turn its back on Mr. Wycherley, and extend a helping hand to poor little Rose!”

“But Mr. Wycherley is hardly a person of importance to Monksford, in that sense.”

“No, but Rose is. She has been a terrible obstructive, you may be sure of that. Besides, these social regulations are framed as general rules. Each individual case has its special features, of

course. As aunt Gwendolyn used always to impress on me, before that fortunate time when she renounced me altogether, there are social rules to which we must submit, even though we may not altogether approve. She had a high sounding phrase about laws framed for the protection of society which, in my girlish days, she used to clap as an extinguisher upon my mutinous queryings."

"There are plenty of such aphorisms generally ready to silence the inconvenient questionings of too independent young thinkers."

"And they serve their purpose well enough, until one begins to understand that their unanswerability results only from their extreme intangibility," Kate replied, smiling quietly to herself at her success in gradually drawing away her lover's thoughts from contemplation of the high moral standard of Monksford society. It was no use to say to him,—“These people are too firmly rooted in the belief of their own immaculate virtue and infallible wisdom, to be reached by anything you may say.” But she boldly avowed that opinion to herself, and held it the best thing she could do for him to draw his thoughts away from them. There were still publicans and sinners to fall back upon, like Mrs. Cripps, and holders of lax moral theories, such as Mrs. Daniels, meek little Mrs. Buller, and others.

The afternoon brought one of these lax moralists to the Court—Mrs. Huddleston. “Oh, Miss Tollmache, we are in such trouble! and I don't know how it is, but we all seem to look to you. My son—” a sob choked her utterance.

“Dear Mrs. Huddleston,” Kate said, keeping her visitor’s hand clasped in her own, as she sat down on the sofa beside her,—“You and I may speak openly to each other. Your son has had a fortunate escape.”

“Oh, Miss Tollmache! do you feel it so! I feel it so deeply, and yet it seems cruel to admit it. In me it seems like vindictive feeling to say so. But you—”

“It is the truth, therefore I cannot but admit it. I was never blind to my little protégée’s faults, and always felt your son had made a mistake, and given his love to a girl incapable of appreciating the value of what she had won. If any proof were wanting, it is abundantly supplied in the fact that she could be drawn away from him by the mere glitter of a handsome appearance and fascinating manner. This must be a terrible blow to him; but the cruel sharp pain of timely disenchantment is far better, than the gradual discovery of the truth too late, and the life-long dull aching of a disappointed, chilled heart.”

Mrs. Huddleston’s tears were falling fast. “It is such a relief to me to hear you speak thus. You, who were Rose’s friend, and are not personally concerned in this sad misfortune. My poor boy! if he could have but been saved in a less painful way. You must not think it a mother’s fond partiality, Miss Tollmache, but he is so good and unselfish. All thought of himself seems lost now in his bitter sorrow for the sad fate of this unhappy girl; and that is what has brought me here to-day. He is building on the hope you may be able to do some-

thing. The Playfairs are very poor, and Doctor Playfair openly says he cannot sacrifice the prospects of all his six remaining children, by incurring the heavy expense and risk to his practice involved in going in pursuit of Rose. Neither will he let us help him, at which I cannot wonder. I hope you may be able to do something."

Kate told her all she had done. "I build more than on anything else," she said, "on my young cousin Lewis Gwynne, to whom I have written. He has just come of age, is entirely his own master, with plenty of money, and just the disposition to enter heartily into the project. He has always been very fond of me, and I have laid my commands upon him to start in pursuit at once, and to continue the hunt until he comes upon their track somewhere. He has lived almost all his life abroad, and fortunately knows Mr. Wycherley quite well; while, as they have not met for some years, Mr. Wycherley is not the least likely to recognise him. This will greatly facilitate the chance of his being able to keep them in sight, should he come across them, until Doctor Playfair can reach them. As she is not of age, the rest is easy; and Lewis's knowledge of foreign ways and languages will render all that Doctor Playfair might have found difficult perfectly easy. You must tell your son all this, Mrs. Huddleston, and tell him that he must wait patiently. Poor Rose's worst faults have been weakness and vanity. He will live yet to see her a better woman than she would ever have been had she gone through life with what the world calls an unscathed character.

“Miss Tollmache, you are indeed a comforter,” Mrs. Huddleston said warmly; and she had nearly added,—“May I ask my son to come and see you himself.” But with motherly caution she paused in time. He would surely be in danger of falling in love with such a woman, and that would never do. “But how,” she added, “have you, at your age, learned to look at things in a light so different from the ordinary one?”

“Simply, I suppose, by always trying to look at everything in its true light, regardless of what other people thought. People say, Mrs. Huddleston, that I am very cynical. But if I have learned to see things in their true light, it is through that very cynicism.”

Mrs. Huddleston smiled. “I am old enough to be your mother, yet I do not suppose that I have seen anything like so much of the world as you have. Still I have observed, that very often those who are charged with being somewhat coldly cynical in their opinions, are more forward in acts of kindness than those who are loud professors, in words, of great tender-heartedness. If your cynicism admits of your rejoicing in having darted a very bright ray of hope and comfort into two very sad and desolate houses, you may rejoice exceedingly, Miss Tollmache.”

She rose as she spoke, and held out her hand with such a look in her kind motherly face, that Kate threw her arms round her neck and kissed her, sealing thereby another of those friendships with people much beneath her in position, which so much

astonished her blue-blooded relatives and acquaintances.

Then, when it was falling dusk, Miss Tollmache, in a manner most unbecoming to her position, sallied forth from the Court on foot and unattended, carrying a basket filled with hot-house fruits and flowers, and made her way by back streets to the Playfairs' house, actually succeeding in eluding the Argus' eyes of Monksford. She sat for more than an hour with Mrs. Playfair, talking, the world in general would have said, most cynically. Nature had gifted her with considerable aptitude of expression and much power of illustration, and she made use of both on that occasion, to turn the seamy side of respectability outwards with merciless severity. Mrs. Playfair, listlessly quiescent at first, soon began to rouse herself into interested attention. Cynicism is not in general supposed to be a healing balm to a wounded heart! but certainly the poor woman gradually brightened under the application, until the result proclaimed itself in her exclaiming,—

“Oh, Miss Tollmache, how differently you put things from most people! You make my poor darling seem less guilty than hundreds whom no one blames.”

Kate smiled. “That is just what I think her,” she replied, “and therefore I say to you, don't give way to despair. We shall get her back yet; and how much soever the future may be clouded by this sad folly of hers, be sure it will be bright compared with the trouble of the present moment.”

Mrs. Playfair's wan face saddened again with

an anxious look. "If we should get her back, what can we do then? Oh, it is hard to be so poor."

"Never think of that," Kate replied, divining all the perplexities which were rising in the harassed mother's mind. "Let us only get her back, and then it will be time to think for the future. Now I must leave my flowers to keep you in mind of my sermon, for I must not stay longer."

Very soon afterwards Doctor Playfair came in, and his own worn weary face brightened as his wife, with almost a smile, told him all Kate had said; and he ate, with something like appetite, a piece of nice tender steak which Mrs. Cripps had taken the liberty to send for the doctor's supper; while the children revelled in a rich plumcake, which the baker had hoped Mrs. Playfair would not be angry at his sending to them; and their mother, with a full heart, apportioned out the beautiful grapes and peaches grown in the Court hothouses: so there was quite a little feast that night in the house, on good things which certainly seemed to have a moral as well as physical excellence in their flavour.

"What were you thinking of so deeply, while I was playing chess with your father?" the rector asked, pausing for a last good night at the hall door.

"Rose has run away," Kate replied, "misled by vanity, ignorance, and having been taught from a child a false estimate of almost everything. Who deserves the blame?"

"Her mother probably."

“Who was most likely brought up in just the same way by a mother similarly trained. Where is the blame finally to rest?”

“God knows!” he replied, kissing her once more, as he turned on his heel.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DEUS EX MACHINA.

TO those who admit the earlier mentioned tendency of truth, even in respect of matters of fact, not palpably thrust into notice, to lurk hidden behind the fictions on which the multitude love to feed, it will be no matter of surprise that Monksford remained entirely unsuspecting of the great event which had taken place,—that Miss Tollmache was actually going to become the wife of its rector. Perhaps that evil church path in some measure aided to keep it in darkness. Though it was patent that he was often at the Court, and though Miss Bradley proclaimed far and wide that she never did see a man so changed as her cousin, who had grown as light-hearted as any boy, and as full of life and spirit, no suspicion of the truth dawned upon the benighted town. Miss Witham declared, in a tone heavily charged with unspoken meaning, that for her part, she could not see the change which other people professed to see in Mr. Lawrence,—at least not the improvement. She could not indeed be blind to the fact that of late

his sermons had not been what they had been of yore, when he gave up less time to society. They had certainly deteriorated in doctrinal merit. Mrs. Corbett, less outspoken than she might have been, had Mrs. Collier and Mr. Smithson not both been present at that memorable meeting the day after the rector's return, merely said, with an air of scornful indifference, that if a clergyman considered it in accordance with his profession to be doing nothing all day save dangle about after people of much higher rank than himself, there was nothing more to be said; but that she thought a great increase of dissent was the only result to be expected from such conduct. She did not herself set an example of such a result. Mr. Corbett was a prosperous man. They had moved some years since into one of the best houses in the town; a humble page had become a footman in livery; a quiet brougham had soon followed; and that had lately changed into a carriage and pair. These are not the circumstances under which a tendency to dissent generally grows apace.

Beyond the fact that the marriage should take place early in the spring, nothing was definitely settled at the Court. But the Olympians had not been kept in the state of ignorance in which the inferior creation were allowed to remain; and there had been much running to and fro, and much interchange of comments and confidences. Lady Clanraven, bathed in tears and sal-volatile, declared that she really had not courage to write and tell Lord Clanraven of the dreadful disgrace which had fallen upon the family. A poor clergyman, a man of

no family! Had he possessed a large fortune, it would of course have been different. Families must have a beginning; and if a man had a large fortune wherewith to found one, it was a reasonable aspiration to seek to aid its establishment by an alliance with some ancient house, as Mr. Congreive, for instance, had done. But this was too dreadful!

“But Mr. Lawrence is said to be a most excellent man,” put in Eleanor Tollmache, rejoicing secretly over her cousin Kate being thus safely disposed of, and delighting a little in plaguing her mother. “And you know it is quite the thing now to fall in love with clergymen, and sacrifice all your worldly prospects for love in a rural vicarage and a life of good works.”

“‘Quite the thing.’ My dear Eleanor, do not let me hear you use such horrid expressions, and talk such nonsense. I declare it positively makes me sick. I am sure this great fiasco is enough for once, without any such absurd talking.”

“Well, mother,” chimed in Gertrude, more logically than consolatorily,—“I really do not see what is the use of crying yourself into a fright over a thing you cannot help. It is not as if Kate would be in London. She will be buried away in the country, quite out of every one’s way; so I really don’t see that she does anyone much harm except herself. I wonder what uncle Horace will do?”

Startled, perhaps, at the dreadful suggestion contained in this remark, Lady Clanraven rose and looked at herself in the glass; then drying her eyes, with a heavy sigh she said,—

“Yes, indeed, I wonder.” And then she sat down

again, and began to reflect, resolving to manifest a spirit of Christian fortitude, and to turn this great disaster to some good account if possible.

"Mother," said Eleanor suddenly, "I met Mrs. Jarvis riding this morning, and she told me she had heard from Clarissa, and that Mr. Wycherley has run away with some doctor's daughter in Monksford, whom Kate had made quite a friend of. Clarissa says she is rather pretty, but they can't think how she got hold of Mr. Wycherley."

"There is no knowing. These second-rate people are so artful, and girls of that class are always bold. I am sure I am very sorry for Mr. Wycherley. It is a sad fate for a man to be tied for life to a wife beneath him in position; and she will not gain much by her manœuvres, for he is far from rich."

"Oh, but no one supposes he intends to marry her."

"Heavens, Eleanor! Don't let me hear another word on the subject, I desire. Mrs. Jarvis had no business to tell you anything about it. I consider it most improper for girls to discuss such topics. Well, I always knew Kate was too fond of low people; but I never suspected her of such proclivities. A nice wife for a clergyman, indeed, with such friends! Really, I almost begin to think it may be as well, after all, for your poor uncle. He must have gone through a great deal."

The feelings at Eaglescliff, when the news reached it, were of pure unmixed satisfaction at the permanent removal of a dangerous rock ahead, in a manner not calculated to arouse the faintest spark of jealousy. In fact, at the moment, Lady Jarvis at least could

hardly spare a passing thought to the announcement. All the indignation, all the bitterness of which her soul was capable, were centred on Rose Playfair, and the unfortunate victim of her evil arts and machinations. Disgracefully though she felt herself to have been duped, Lady Jarvis, true to the instincts of her class, poured all the vials of her wrath upon Rose's head; and the more she felt that she had been deceived by Mr. Wycherley, the more bitterly she railed against the girl who had thus infamously entangled him. At Knyaston the case was just the reverse. There Miss Tollmache's intended marriage banished all other considerations. Mrs. Pendennis was bitter against the rector, and Herbert Pendennis, who was poetically disposed, was gloomy, and inclined to what he regarded as a Byronic air of ferocious melancholy; declaring that man never truly loved but once, and that, his love once blighted, life henceforth was but a scorched burning desert waste for him.

Day after day passed away, and Mrs. Playfair, hardly ever going out of the house, save when forced to do so, watched with a beating heart each postman as he came along the street, and either saw him pass by, or received some unimportant letter, with a sickening sense of disappointment. Rose had promised to write soon, yet no letter came; and what that meant, the poor mother only too well guessed. The deluded, betrayed, unhappy girl had no heart to write home and tell how cruelly she had been deceived. Perhaps, even yet, she was daily hoping against hope that her confidence in the still unfulfilled promise might be justified.

“Oh, if I could only know that they were married!” Mrs. Playfair exclaimed with a burst of tears one day to Kate Tollmache, when a letter which, at the first moment of its being brought in she had fancied bore a foreign postage stamp, turned out a useless circular; and then boldly and fearlessly, Kate told her that, in her judgment, it was better as it was.

“Conventional morality would of course be satisfied, and Rose’s character, in the eyes of the world, be redeemed, but what of her true benefit and future fate? She would be irrevocably bound to a man who would soon neglect, probably ill use her. She would be exposed to all the moral contamination of constant association with profligate characters whom her beauty and amiability would be certain to attract, and she is easily led. Ask yourself, Mrs. Playfair, what would be the probable result? Is it not better she should come back to you to lead in future a good and true, even though a blighted life, free from such contamination and temptation?”

It was a muscular sort of consolation to offer, and in its full bearings, quite beyond the grasp of the sorrowing mother; still it was not without its beneficial results. The mere fact that a woman of Miss Tollmache’s stamp thus warmly espoused poor Rose’s cause, gave Mrs. Playfair courage and hopefulness to an extent greater than she was at the moment herself aware; and with steady determination, Kate held to her declaration that Rose would yet return. “My cousin will be safe to come across them somewhere in time. Perhaps it may be as well it should not be until Rose has had time to reach the bitte

certainty that Mr. Wycherley has no intention of fulfilling his promise. Then I am sure she will be easily persuaded to leave him."

In Monksford the chatter began by degrees to subside. Even the fiercely burning furnace of malignant scandal cannot be kept up at white heat without occasional supplies of fresh fuel; and not even a foreign letter, or a suspicious looking telegram for Doctor Playfair, could be heard of. The virtuous inhabitants of the town held themselves aloof from contamination; and watchful mothers gathered their broods under their wings, lest they should be polluted by association with even the kin of evildoers; and all plaintively wished that the Playfairs would leave the place,—assuming an injured tone which seemed to say, "We have never done them any harm. What right have they to inflict this constant annoyance upon us?"

After the first shock was over, however, and the high-toned moral policy of the town began to be clearly apparent, fresh cause for indignation was soon supplied. Mrs. Playfair, and Alice also, were discovered to have become visitors at the Court. Both were seen in Miss Tollmache's pony carriage, and the pale thin subdued face of the former was also often seen by the side of Mrs. Huddleston in her carriage.

"We are sisters in sorrow, my dear," Mrs. Huddleston had said; "and Providence has apportioned to me a larger share of this world's goods than to you. Let me do all I can to afford you any little enjoyment."

"But George?"

"George is gone to Australia."

"Oh, Mrs. Huddlestone, have we brought that upon you?"

Mrs. Huddlestone smiled through a few tears. "No, my dear—or at least only for a time. His father had a little business which wanted attention there, and he thought it would be better to let George go just now, than send anyone else. Please God he will be back next autumn."

All this was felt to be a great deal too bad. "Just helping to keep them here," Mrs. Tatnell said,—“and a very poor proof of friendship. Now if they would help them to get away, that would really be doing them a service, and everyone else too.”

Doctor and Mrs. Playfair, and Alice, dined at the Court last night," put in Miss Witham. "I heard it from Miss Bradley. The rector was there, of course. And a few nights since they dined at The Hall, to meet some friend of the Huddlestones from a distance."

"I know Miss Bradley used to be afraid of Rose," replied Mrs. Tatnell; "but you mark my words, and see if, between them, Miss Tollmache and Mrs. Huddlestone don't try to get up a match between the rector and Alice."

"Mercy on us, do change the subject," cried Mrs. Corbett. "It makes me downright sick to hear of such goings on. People whom no one ever thought of visiting, petted up because that girl has disgraced herself; and they actually mounting into society over the ruins of their daughter's character!"

This last trenchant saying was held worthy of Mrs. Corbett's reputation as a clever woman, and

became quite a stock phrase in Monksford. Manifesting pretty clearly the sort of effect produced upon her by the sharp pastoral rebuke she had received.

At Wycherley Court and the rectory, however, other subjects for consideration were beginning to press for attention. Mr. Tollmache's mere agreement to the fact of his daughter's marriage taking place in the spring was hardly a sufficiently definite foundation upon which to build up all the necessary arrangements. Yet he did not seem disposed to reveal himself any further. That he was growing day by day more partial to his future son-in-law was evident. But it was also evident that his constant society, without any further change in the domestic arrangements at the Court, was more likely to be agreeable to Mr. Tollmache, than all the revolutions involved by the marriage; and true to his nature, he made no sign.

"What does he intend, Kate?" Lionel asked her one day a little anxiously.

"I don't know what he intends. What he wishes is, that we should go on perpetually as at present."

"That is asking too much, my wee darling. We are always crying out for more. When first the utter loneliness of my life came to an end, I thought I could be contented for ever with the mere consciousness that you loved me. But now that will not do. Besides, there is much to be arranged. The rectory will need some renovating; and I must give my good cousin notice to quit."

"Must I turn her out of her home?" Kate asked, a little ruefully.

“No, dear, I am doing it. She would be no companion for you; and had I married a girl from behind a counter, no one who had acted as mistress of my house should have remained in it afterwards. She has no claim on me. She is independent; and the arrangement has been always one of mutual convenience, nothing more. What are you looking so grave about?”

“It is the one drawback to such a marriage as ours,” she answered thoughtfully. “It does seem a little hard for all the relatives.”

“On your side?”

“Not at all. On both sides. Nature has no business to indulge in such freaks. She ought to endow all people with dispositions suitable to the general characteristics of the social class in which she places them. If she had done this for both you and me—”

“Ill-natured tongues would have been deprived of the chance of stigmatising me as a fortune hunter, certainly. I should have gained that very small advantage, but at the cost of losing the greatest blessing, the most ennobling consciousness which can fall to the share of any man in this world.”

“Ennobling consciousness?” she repeated, half-puzzled.

“Yes, my darling. To declare myself utterly unworthy of your love, would be the stereotyped position I ought to assume, thereby charging you, by implication, with possession of a nature sufficiently ignoble to spend its devotion on a worthless object. I prefer to admit that such a woman as you are, my Kate, would never love unless there were something really worthy of love in the object

of her affection. That is what I call an ennobling consciousness; and I do not know one which could more thoroughly rouse a man to strive unceasingly to live up to his very highest powers. That is what I should have lost, if nature had denied to you such fearless independence of character. I cannot so well look at the subject from your point of view."

"You can just reverse the positions. That is all that is required."

"Then we need not quarrel with nature. But we are no nearer a solution of the question with which we started. I must press your father for some more definite settlement."

"To-morrow evening, then, after dinner, you had better speak to him."

But when Lionel Lawrence arrived the next evening, Kate came down to him in the drawing-room with rather an anxious face. "I do not think you must say anything to-night," she said; "something has put him out, and annoyed him very much. I think it was some letter he received this morning. He has been abstracted and thoughtful all day, and, to say the truth, rather disagreeable. You had better let it stand over for a day or two. He—"

Mr. Tollmache's entrance stopped her words, and they went in to dinner. Mr. Tollmache was certainly not his usual easy good-tempered self, and the rector, fully coinciding with Kate's opinion, talked after dinner of indifferent subjects, until they joined her in the drawing-room; suspecting no more than she herself had done that a *Deus ex Machina*, as wholly unexpected as Mr. Mostyn's tipsy groom to Mr.

Octavius Buller, had suddenly appeared upon the scene.

He was talking to Kate at the tea-table when Mr. Tollmache, rising from an arm-chair in which he had been sitting, sunk in deep thought, planted himself on the hearthrug, with his back against the chimney-piece, and plunging both hands deep in his trouser pockets, said,—

“Kate!”

“What is it, father?” she asked, a little startled at the almost stern abruptness of his tone.

“When I gave my sanction to you two being married in the spring, I didn’t make any conditions.”

“No, sir, you did not.”

“Well, circumstances have altered. I am going to make a condition now, upon which alone I will hear of it.”

Kate’s heart, and probably her lover’s too, for the matter of that, began to beat faster. Mr. Tollmache spoke with an almost vehement decision most unusual with him. She however answered quietly,—

“What is the condition?”

“Simply that you do not leave my house. Lawrence must have a curate then. He can put him into the rectory. You must both come and live here with me.”

“My dear father!” Kate said. She was too much surprised to say anything more.

“Yes. I insist upon it. I am sorry for you Lawrence. It may not be so comfortable, in some respects, for you, as being in your own house. But if you choose to covet another man’s only protector, you must take the consequences. Kate, read that

letter, and you will understand why I decide thus."

He drew a letter from his pocket as he spoke, and threw it on the table. "Read it out loud," he said, as she took it up, "that Lawrence may understand also."

"Aunt Gwendolyn!" she said, a quick suspicion darting a sudden flash of merriment across her face, as she opened the letter, and began to read,—

"DEAREST HORACE,—I have really felt unable to write sooner. The news you communicated was so very unexpected—would that I could truthfully add, so very satisfactory. Well, dear Kate has always been unlike other girls, therefore one could not expect but that she should manifest some eccentricity in her choice of a husband. Certainly Mr. Lawrence's sermons are admirable, and I am told he is a most exemplary clergyman,—so we must hope it is all for the best. And I am sure Kate has our very best wishes for her happiness; though older and more experienced women, like myself, may well have some misgivings whether, in the close union of married life, she may not find that differences of social position are marked by differences in tone of thought and feeling which can hardly fail to be painful, if not positively humiliating to her. Enough of this, however. Kate, I know by experience, would never brook advice or warning. Now both would be worse than useless.

"My thoughts turn more, my dear Horace, I must confess, to yourself. I have often feared that Kate's peculiarities must have been a little inimical to your

comfort. Still, no one could deny that your household under her management has always been a most admirably conducted one. The result of having thoroughly good servants, you will perhaps say. You men always think so, but indeed you are mistaken. Even with the best of servants, much depends upon the head of the household; and it is for that reason I much fear that in losing Kate you will suffer more than you perhaps anticipate. I have been thinking much of this, dear Horace, and it has occurred to me that in this matter I might be able to be of service to you.

“You have, I think, seen my sister Constance, Lady Assheton, lately left a widow. But you do not know her. To know is to worship her. A most lovely disposition I have never seen; and she is graceful and refined beyond description. She is yet quite unsettled as to her future arrangement. Her jointure is not large, and she has still her daughter Edith, a lovely girl just twenty, at home. Now, why should she not find a home with you, and in return take the superintendence of your household? It would be simply a mutual accommodation and I am sure a great advantage to both. The presence of a girl of Edith’s age would be quite sufficient to remove any possible objection, and she would be a daughter to you. She is as amiable as she is beautiful. Dear Constance, although her devotion to the memory of her lost husband is really quite beautiful, never allows her own ~~undying~~ sorrow to render her gloomy or fretful. You would find her always bright and cheerful. The more I think of the plan, the more I see how numerous

would be the advantages to both yourself and Constance. You would secure perfect comfort in your house, and a charming hostess for your visitors. She would gain all the advantages of a home, and better chances of society for Edith, than she could possibly have as a widow living alone. If I saw any chance of Constance marrying again, I should not think so highly of this project; but of that I know there is no chance. She is a widow in heart and soul, as well as in outward circumstances; and there is no room with her for a second love.

“Think well over this suggestion, dear Horace, and let me soon hear, that I may make the proposal to Constance.—Ever believe me, your affect. sister,

GWENDOLYN CLANRAVEN.”

Kate Tollmache’s voice had trembled more than once as she read, and when she had finished the letter, she threw herself back in her chair and laughed heartily.

“Oh, it’s all very well for you to laugh,” her father said, with a sort of savage sulkiness of tone, —“but I can tell you it’s no laughing matter to me. This is only the first muttering of the storm. That woman Jarvis has written me a most gushing note, regretting that circumstances have prevented them from seeing more of us this year, but they hope to be better neighbours in future. Now that Wycherley has put his foot in it, I should have both those detestable girls hurled at my head; and you wouldn’t be gone from the house a month, before I’ll be bound Gwendolyn would be down upon me, bringing that sister of hers for a visit; and if once they got into

the house, I'll be bound no earthly power would dislodge them again."

"Poor dear father! I fear you are not as grateful as you should be for so much kind anxiety to console and aid you."

"Grateful, be hanged! I'll be bound there's a dozen more of them hovering about in the offing now, on the look-out for a chance. I should be torn limb from limb. Remember, Kate, I've had some experience of this sort of thing. When your poor mother died, I should have been forced into tenfold bigamy, I believe, if I hadn't bolted abroad. I'm not going to be forced to fly again. I've grown used now to having something like a home, and I'm tired of perpetual wandering. So I tell you, you and Lawrence must just live here. You can make what arrangements you please otherwise; but be left alone to the tender mercies of all these old cats, I will not."

He was clearly very much in earnest. When threatened with serious disturbance of his own peace and comfort, he could be both energetic and resolute. "Oh, Lionel, shall you dislike it very much?" Kate said, as he wished her good night.

"I shall not dislike it in the least, my wee pet. Such a suggestion, coming from your father, is under the circumstances about the greatest gratification I could have received. I suppose the fact may be made public now?"

"Oh yes, as much as you like. Well, I never expected such important aid from aunt Gwendolyn, of all people."

Good Miss Bradley meanwhile had been anxiously

revolving in her mind that terrible suggestion of a possible design on the part of Miss Tollmache and Mrs. Huddleston to mend the damaged Playfair fortunes by entrapping the rector into a marriage with Alice Playfair, and had arrived at the conclusion that it would be decidedly her duty to put him on his guard. He was so unsuspecting, and so good-natured, he might easily, she thought, be led into a false position. Accordingly, the next morning at breakfast she prepared to carry out her design.

"Were any of the Playfairs at the Court last night, Lionel?" she asked.

"No. Mr. and Miss Tollmache were quite alone."

"But they have been there a good deal lately, have they not?"

"Not very often, I think. Both Miss Tollmache and Mrs. Huddleston have been very kind in doing all they can to cheer poor Mrs. Playfair in her great trouble. But that is all."

"I wish I could feel sure it was all, Lionel," she replied, in what she intended for a very significant tone. Unfortunately his thoughts had flown to the subject on which they persistently rested, and he hardly heard her words.

"Do you?" he replied absently.

"Yes, indeed I do. I know you don't pay much heed to what is said; but I heard something said about Miss Tollmache the other day which made me feel very uneasy."

These words fully aroused his attention. "What on earth do you mean?" he asked.

"Don't you trust Miss Tollmache too implicitly, Lionel," she rejoined, in a grave and earnest tone,

befitting the importance of the warning she was giving—"or you may repent it. There are a great many people think, and I cannot but feel there is ground for it, that her friendliness towards you isn't for nothing."

"My dear Susan, what on earth are you driving at? Something which leads you hopelessly astray, that is quite certain," he added, with a smile.

"I'm not so sure of that. You are too unsuspecting, Lionel. I don't say anything against Miss Tollmache. I daresay she thinks it would do very well for you also. But many people think, and I believe with good ground, that she and Mrs. Huddleston have got it into their heads to get up a marriage between you and Alice Playfair. My gracious!"

The interjection was due to the remarkable effect produced by her communication. The rector started up from the table with a smothered exclamation, stared at her for a moment, as though doubtful of her sanity, and then throwing himself into an arm chair by the fire, burst into a fit of violent and prolonged laughter. Miss Bradley sat petrified, coffee pot in hand.

"Well, of all the mare's nests!" he exclaimed, when at last he could find breath to speak, "Who discovered this gigantic one?"

"I am not sure that it is one," she replied, in a slightly offended tone. It is never pleasant to find a communication one has deemed important treated as simply ridiculous.

"Shall I prove it to you?"

"If you can."

“ Well, put down the coffee pot then, or you may chance to scald yourself. The proof that this precious discovery is a mare’s nest lies simply in this—I am engaged, and am to be married in the spring—to Miss Tollmache herself ! ”

The effect of this piece of information fully justified the wisdom of the rector’s suggestion, that before receiving it Miss Bradley should set down the coffee pot. She stared at him in half stupified amazement.

“ You are surely joking, Lionel ? ” she said at last, with a sort of dim confused idea that he wanted to test her powers of credulity.

“ I should not dream of dragging Miss Tollmache’s name into such a joke,” he answered gravely. “ We have been engaged ever since our return from Wales, but more definite arrangements were not finally settled until last night. In all the changes which must of course shortly be made, there is only one point which causes me any regret, Susan ; that is, the impossibility of your continuing any longer to find a home with me.”

This method of putting the matter brought it home to Miss Bradley as a grave reality, far more effectually than anything else could have done ; though she still felt as if the fact was too wonderful to be fully credited on such very short notice.

“ Oh, of course I always knew I must go whenever you married,” she said, in a vague sort of tone. “ But really, Lionel, I am so astonished, I can hardly believe I am not dreaming. You going to marry Miss Tollmache ! How ever could you find courage to ask her ? ”

"That is just what puzzles me. For the life of me, I cannot understand how it happened. But it did happen, and the thing is done."

"And you are to be married in the spring? How will you get the rectory ready? There will be a great deal to be done, Lionel."

"The rectory will not be wanted, save for a curate. Mr. Tollmache insists we shall live with him at the Court. He does not wish to be left alone."

Miss Bradley sat silent for a little while, trying to grasp firmly all the startling intelligence thus unexpectedly poured in upon her bewildered faculties. When she spoke again, her first question showed plainly enough in what track her thoughts were travelling.

"Is the marriage to be kept a secret? or may it be made known?"

"Made known as much as you please," he replied, with a quiet smile at the supposition that he would have trusted the information to her powers of concealment.

Miss Bradley's first proceeding, on being left alone, was to have a good hearty cry. She had said, and said truly, that she had always known that the rector's marriage would be the sentence of her own expulsion; but being less logically minded than Mrs Corbett, she now wept with a sense of shock and surprise over that which, in theory, she had always anticipated. After this relief, however, she began to gather up her scattered thoughts, and take comfort in contemplating the brighter side of circumstances. She had always been proud of her cousin's rise in life, and ambitious for him, especially in the direction

of matrimony. And now her highest aspirations were far more than realised. "The Honourable Mrs. Lawrence," she repeated to herself more than once, with a far from uncommon confusion of ideas on the subject of heraldic titles. And what an announcement to have it in her power to make. She thought of Miss Witham with a touch of spiteful satisfaction, and of all the other widows and spinsters of Monksford with mild malice; and then she hastily clad herself in bonnet and cloak, and sallied forth, prepared to make good use of such opportunities as fortune might throw in her way.

A list of household requirements carried her in the first place to Mr. Moss's "establishment," as he was wont to term it, which was already gorgeous with signs of approaching Christmas; and so resplendent with glittering colours, and uncompromising newness, that the sombre tinted old gateway opposite seemed by contrast to recede at least a century further into the regions of antiquity.

Mr. Moss came forth as usual from his "counting house," to greet Miss Bradley with smiling cordiality, and discuss the news of the day. And they chatted over the amount of subscriptions received for the usual Christmas gifts to the poor; the state of the Clothing Fund, with other matters of local interest; but not a word did Miss Bradley say regarding the subject which was occupying all her thoughts. Already the shadow of future greatness was upon her. Already she felt herself weighted with responsibilities to which she had hitherto been a stranger. She was the only relative of the rector known to Monksford. As long as he was leading a

quiet bachelor life at the rectory, with only such claims to importance as were given to him by his profession and his own personal weight of character, it had been all very well for her to be on terms of friendly intimacy with Mr. Moss, who professed sound churchmanship, and was a fairly liberal supporter of all parochial institutions. But now the case was different. The rector, as a married man, the husband of a lady of rank and fortune, whose aristocratic father regarded the marriage with such favour as to insist on his future son-in-law living with him, and whose house would consequently be in future the great house of the neighbourhood, would occupy an entirely changed position, and one which rendered it certainly undesirable that a relative of his should be intimate with people who were, after all, only tradespeople.

She talked therefore with a friendliness which was slightly tinged with dignified reserve; and Mr. Moss felt the change and marvelled.

"I should like to know what that old lady is up to?" he remarked to Mrs. Moss afterwards. "She was uncommon 'mighty and condescending this morning."

"You may depend it's just because of the rector getting so thick at the Court," replied Mrs. Moss with asperity. "There's quite a change in him. He looks quite jaunty and independent; not the quiet subdued-like sort of man he used to be. I'm certain they're getting quite stuck up about it."

"If that's their little game," retorted Mr. Moss with energy, "hang me if I don't let them know fast enough that I'm just as good as they are! That's

the way the church gets made unpopular! If they take to giving themselves airs, hang it, I'll go to the chapel myself! I'm not going to stand any such nonsense."

"Oh no, Moss, you mustn't think of that. It's no use cutting off your nose to spite your face; and the chapel isn't half so genteel as the church. The girls would never stand it. Why, the Dysons have had no end of trouble with their family already, and there's like to be quite a split in their house. You stick to the church. You'll be the next churchwarden sure enough, and then they'll have to mind what they're about; and to my mind it's much more the thing for a rising man like you to be churchwarden than to be deacon at the chapel."

To this reasoning the irate Mr. Moss somewhat sulkily assented, mollified to some extent by the remembrance, that as parish churchwarden he would have considerable opportunities of inflicting annoyance on the rector, did he show himself deserving of such moral castigation.





CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COMING STRUGGLE.

MISS BRADLEY was troubled by no such social considerations in respect of the professional element of Monksford. Of course the rector's marriage would place him at a great distance from that circle also, but she had no intention of manifesting an undue amount of exaltation. She only intended to follow his rising star at a fitting distance; by no means to claim an equal level therewith. By the time night came, there was hardly a soul in Monksford who did not know that in the early spring, the stately Miss Tollmache was to become Mrs. Lawrence, and that the rector's future home would be Wycherley Court.

It was a glorious opportunity for prompt wiping out of many a long-standing score. A widow here, a spinster there, could be put on the rack by a meaning emphasis laid on apparently indifferent remarks regarding this most unexpected marriage; and many a matron to boot, who had been known to scheme for sister, cousin, or daughter, could be

lashed by pointed illusions on the same subject. Most highly favoured of all perhaps in the matter of these amenities of social life, was Mrs. Corbett. Had not Miss Witham sarcastically twitted her with predicting after the event? And had not the rector—? Ah, of his mean and cowardly parting thrust, without giving her a chance to retort, unless she had shouted after him down the street like an enraged fish woman, she hardly dared to think even yet; or of the gleam of malicious pleasure she had caught in Mrs. Collier's eyes. Now was her chance. Miss Witham tried to avoid her, but she ran her down with unerring instinct.

“What, still in Monksford, Miss Witham?” she said; “I expected to hear you had started on a tour on the continent.”

“Indeed!” replied Miss Witham coldly, making a good fight for it,—“this is hardly the time of year one would choose for travelling.”

“Not generally. But just think what is going to happen! It is really too bad of Miss Tollmache, with all the world to choose from, to swoop down in this way, and carry off the one poor pet lamb of Monksford.”

Miss Witham looked very grave.

“If your remarks did not appear to me to tread very close on profanity, Mrs. Corbett, I would try to get up a little laugh to amuse you, though I confess I have heard so much of this sort of talk, that it is becoming a matter of difficulty to screw out even a sickly attempt at a smile over this rather feeble little performance in the jesting line.”

“Oh, you regard the announcement of the marriage

as a joke, do you?" replied the outspoken woman, a little taken aback at being thus dauntlessly met. "That accounts, I suppose, for your equanimity. But it is not the first of April, Miss Witham."

"It was not of the marriage I was speaking, but of the remarks made upon it. However, country town jokes are always rather terrible things, so one must not be hypercritical: only it is so hard to screw out a smile. As we don't know much of Miss Tollmache, I don't think we are in a position to form much opinion about the marriage; but I am sure we shall all wish our good rector every happiness."

Finding Miss Witham better armed than she had anticipated, Mrs. Corbett adroitly followed her lead, thus skilfully avoiding the appearance of having been worsted in the skirmish.

"Our good rector," she said, "has of course a right to please himself; but I for one can truly say I never thought so highly of him as some people have professed to do. But then I'm neither widow nor spinster. It's my opinion that he has made an uncommon fool of himself, and so far, I am glad to see that I have not judged him wrongly. How any man can bring himself to marry a woman of higher rank than himself, unless he has a large fortune to offer, passes my comprehension. And when it comes to his going to live with her family, instead of bringing her home to his own house, I should like to know where he can have a grain of self-respect? And a clergyman too! I call it simply disgraceful. I only wish there was another church here, and it's not another Sunday the parish church would see me inside its walls."

"Why don't you go to the chapel?" asked Miss Witham, with a touch of aristocratic sarcasm. "I should have thought it would suit you. I have always understood Mr. Corbett had been brought up a dissenter."

"That's nothing to do with it. I'm not going to leave my church because of the unworthiness of one of her ministers."

"Unworthiness! Oh, Mrs. Corbett, that is rather too strong a word."

"That's a matter of opinion, and I've as much right to mine as anyone else. To my thinking, when a clergyman sets an example of downright worldliness, he's quite unworthy of his profession. It's quite a different case from anyone else. If a man chooses to take upon himself the duty of guiding and directing other people, he's bound to show himself superior to them in all ways. A curate at the rectory, indeed! Mr. Lawrence has never seemed to find his work too much for him before, but now of course the claims of society will have to be attended to. If that doesn't look very like worldliness, I don't know what does."

"So this is what the old lady's airs meant," said Mr. Moss to his wife, when the news reached him. "Well, if that's to be the way of it, I can only say the rector may look elsewhere for handsome donations to his schools and charities. I suppose he doesn't think it worth while taking the trouble to be civil to people now he's going to be a great man, with a rich wife to find all the money he wants."

"Oh, nonsense," replied his wife, with feminine

quickness discerning and seizing on her chances. "It's only Miss Bradley. That isn't at all Mr. Lawrence's way, I'm sure. But really, Moss, I do wish, if this is how it's to be, that you'd see about that nice little villa of Critchet's that'll be vacant in the spring. Miss Tollmache is just the sort of lady, I'm sure, to take an active part in all that concerns the parish; and with you as churchwarden, and they living at the Court, it's really due to yourself not to keep on living here over the shop. Where's the use of a man toiling and getting a good fortune together, as you're doing, if he doesn't live up to it? And I'm sure I never heard of a man in your position living over his shop. I should be downright ashamed for the rector and his lady to have to come and look for us here when there was any business to be settled."

"Well, I have been thinking of it once or twice lately myself," replied Mr. Moss. "I'll look at the place one of these days." And as this was the first occasion when such an appeal had failed to be met by a point blank negative, Mrs. Moss felt greatly encouraged; and she forthwith set about declaring industriously that she was delighted to hear of the intended marriage; that she believed Miss Tollmache was everything that was excellent, and would make an admirable clergyman's wife; and that she was sure Mr. Lawrence was a man any lady in the land might be glad to marry; that she hoped they would be very happy, and was sure they would be a great blessing to the place.

Mr. Octavius Buller, returning home that afternoon in a very complacent frame of mind, calculating

what would be the smallest amount of cost at which he could secure the largest amount of Christmas delectation for himself—Mrs. Buller being, of course, quite outside any such calculations—was met by her on his entrance in a state of lively animation.

“Oh, Octavius!” she exclaimed, “have you heard the news?”

“No. I’ve heard none. What’s up now? That fool of a girl turned up?”

“Poor little Rose? Oh no. But the rector is going to marry Miss Tollmache, and they’re to live at the Court with Mr. Tollmache.”

“I don’t believe a word of it.”

“But indeed it’s quite true. Mrs. Tatnell had it from Miss Bradley herself, and she told me, and every one is talking about it.”

“My God!” ejaculated Mr. Buller, with his most deep-mouthed profanity, “Lawrence going to marry Miss Tollmache, and live at the Court! Most extraordinary! I never thought of that,” he added, rather thinking aloud than actually addressing his wife, and he began to pace up and down the room with hasty steps.

“I don’t suppose any one ever thought of such a thing,” said his wife. Not being entirely in her husband’s confidence, she did not always perceive the drift of his remarks. “After all, Mr. Lawrence’s father was in trade they say, and I don’t suppose anyone ever supposed Miss Tollmache would think of him. Such a fine handsome girl, and quite one of the county ladies, and with such a fortune too. It does seem quite surprising!”

Mr. Buller had not yet recovered sufficiently from

his astonishment to settle down into steady consistent meditation over this entirely unforeseen conjunction of circumstances; and his wife's words gave, for the moment, a very bitter turn to his desultory reflections. They instantly roused his natural tendency to look at everything from a strongly subjective point of view. What she said was true enough. Mr. Lawrence was the son of a tradesman, with no special personal advantages—beyond a height of something over six feet, and a well-made, powerful frame,—and no fortune to speak of. To his share was falling a woman—young, handsome, clever, high-born, and wealthy; while he, Octavius Buller— Here there came a sort of sudden break in his thoughts. They seemed with those two words, which represented to himself his whole stupendous personality, to have reached a climax, beyond which there was nothing but sheer inevitable downfall. In this case the downfall was to the extreme depths of humiliation, involved in contemplation of the pale, faded, spiritless woman to whom the law inexorably bound him. That day of small things, when her little fortune had seemed a prize worth securing at any cost, was far in dim distance. That fortune had been used profitably, as was the fitting use of all things, to aid in the advancement of Octavius Buller. It had increased and multiplied, and now formed part of that capital on which so much depended. But the woman had failed in her duties in this respect; and though Mr. Buller regarded a family as on the whole a useless and expensive encumbrance, now that visions of future glories as a county man were growing constantly

more vivid, a son to be his heir seemed only a proper appendage to the rest of his importance. Moreover the woman remained, faded and spiritless. "What a mistress for Wycherley Court!" was a thought which had more than once darted through his mind; and it came back now with tenfold force, as her words brought up the contrast between his own deserts and fortune and those of his neighbour.

"I saw Miss Tollmache walking to-day," prattled on little Mrs. Buller, who five-and-twenty years of married life had not taught to discern the signs of the times, "and she did look so handsome, in a walking costume all trimmed with beautiful fur, and a hat to match. And really, Octavius, when you think of it, Mr. Lawrence is a fine looking man, and quite the gentleman in appearance. They'll be a handsome couple; and I'm sure I hope they'll be very happy. Miss Tollmache is very stately, but there's something nice and kind looking about her too. I think it's her beautiful brown eyes."

"For heaven's sake, woman, stop your idiotic chatter! Can't you see that I'm busy, and want to think. Go and get me my slippers; and then for goodness' sake take yourself away somewhere, and leave me in peace. I have business to attend to."

Mrs. Buller obeyed without a word. There was nothing unusual to her in such treatment.

"Now you need not go and light the drawing-room fire," her husband called to her as she was leaving the room, after having deposited the slippers on the hearthrug. "I shall have done all I want by dinner time, so you can come back then."

“Very well, Octavius,” she replied, meekly returning to shiver, wrapped up in a shawl, for an hour or more in her fireless bedroom. She was thin and chilly, and had always a blue pinched look in the winter; for Mr. Octavius Buller kept a sharp lookout on the coal cellar, allowing such a slender margin beyond the requirements of the kitchen, and the amount of coals necessary to keep up the cheerful blaze he liked to see when he was at home in the evening, that the merest handful of firing was all she could indulge herself with through the day.

Mr. Buller having made up a good fire, put on his slippers, poured out for himself a glass of his best wine, lighted his cigar, and drawing an arm chair close up to the glowing blaze, sat down to meditate undisturbed over what he had just heard.

He felt it very difficult to form any opinion as to whether this unexpected event would be likely to turn out a weight to the good or evil side of his fortunes. Wycherley Court, an excellent country house with charming grounds, standing really within the precincts of the town, seemed as if especially designed for the use of a wealthy rector. This marriage was clearly contracted with the full sanction of Mr. Tollmache. What more likely than that he might at once begin negotiations for the purchase of the place? But then, on the other hand, would Mr. Lawrence care to remain permanently rector of Monksford? Mr. Buller was the son of a professional man, and as such, felt himself quite able to hold his own in any circle; but he was very certain that had he been the son of a tradesman, and thus unexpectedly favoured by

fortune, he should at once have removed himself to some sphere in which his antecedents would have been less well known.

Thus doubt and uncertainty held sway over his meditations, reducing the fruit of his reflections to the meagre result of a resolution to keep carefully on the alert for any waifs or strays of information which might chance to be floating about, to indicate, like the straws of proverbial fame, which way the wind blew.

He had just about reached this conclusion when his shivering wife returned, in company with the table-cloth. Her aspect did not tend to decrease his sense of unmerited misfortune, as contrasted with the good luck of his neighbour; but he was nevertheless gracious to her, inviting her to come near the fire, and actually offering her a glass of wine, which she accepted with trembling surprise. Let it not be for a moment supposed that these manifestations of amiability arose from any stirrings of that aimless kind-heartedness which Mr. Buller held in such strong contempt, that he glowered in the admission, at least to himself, that he could never remember to have done a good action from which he did not reap ultimately some personal benefit. His present object was to secure as much information as possible, and towards that end his wife was an important factor.

“Well, and when is this wonderful marriage to come off?” he asked urbanely, when they were comfortably seated at dinner.

“In the spring.”

“And are they really going to live at the Court?”

“Oh, yes. Miss Bradley said so; and a curate is to have the rectory. Mr. Tollmache can't bear to be left alone; and she says he has taken so to Mr. Lawrence he's always wanting him there. I suppose he almost lives there now. It must be very dull for her, poor soul. I am sorry for her. She'll have to turn out, of course. But oh, Octavius,” she continued quite cheerfully, under the invigorating influence of her husband's unwonted urbanity and excellent sherry, which it was very rarely her lot to taste,—“Mrs. Tatnell says there's such a stir about it in the town. Let alone Miss Witham, and young Mrs. Campbell, always running after him, Mrs. Roberts has been getting her sister here, and asking him constantly to the house, and ever so many others have been trying for him; and now they're all that mad, they'd tear Miss Tollmache to pieces if they could. And Mrs. Corbett's twitting them all round, and saying such things about the rector. You know she's hated him ever since he gave her that set down about the Playfairs. And by what Mrs. Tatnell says, the whole place seems to be in quite a ferment.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed Mr. Buller, quite good-naturedly. “I don't doubt it. You ladies, my dear, have terrible tongues; but I must say for you, Louisa, I don't think I ever heard you say an ill-natured word of anybody.”

Mrs. Buller's little colourless eyes grew quite round with astonishment. “I hope not,” she said. “I wouldn't like to be ill-natured to anyone. But oh, Octavius, I was nearly forgetting. Mrs. Tatnell was asking about the churchwardenship.

She wants to know if you are really going to stand. She has a vote, you know, and she says Moss shall never have it. You know she hates them. She is spiteful, I think, for all she's always very civil to me. She says if you really mean to stand, she'll try and get people to vote for you. You know, Octavius," she added confidentially, "I don't think she does it because she cares much about you; it's only to spite the Mosses. But the votes'll be just as useful, won't they?"

Mr. Buller did not immediately reply; and seeing that he was lost in thought, his wife was wise enough to hold her tongue. The churchwardenship! He had never relinquished his intention of standing, but after the Parker and drainage scandal, he had judged it best to remain quite quiet for a time; and he had been so busy with other things, that the subject had not been much in his thoughts. Now it arose before him in an entirely altered aspect. Monksford, like many other towns of a like character, was heavily weighted by the good intentions of the dead, manifested in charitable bequests and endowments, hampered in many cases by some of those marvellous and complicated conditions, whereby departed donors are wont to ensure that their memories shall be execrated to all generations by the harassed administrators of their benevolent intentions. Of several of these bequests the vicar and churchwardens for the time being were *ex officio* trustees. The churchwardens of Monksford had therefore a certain social weight and importance, irrespective of the exact official duties of their post. County families, anxious to

secure for the son of some dependant or poor relation the great advantages of being placed upon the foundation of the grammar school, had been known to pay great court to churchwardens, and ask them to dinner. But that was not the special point in Mr. Buller's thoughts at the moment; rather the frequent intercourse thereby necessitated between the rector and his co-trustees.

It had become quite a traditional usage that on sundry occasions of the settlement of business connected with these trusts, the churchwardens should dine with the rector; and at other stray times communications were often necessary. Now, though it by no means follows as a necessity that frequent association with a man need result in your gaining an insight into his private affairs and intentions, your chances are certainly greater than if you hardly ever met him. A carefully noted remark here, a well-put question there, may do much for you. You have at least opportunities which are otherwise wanting to you. This was the point to which, at the moment, the thoughts of the sagacious Mr. Buller were turned, and a full appreciation of its consequence made the churchwardenship suddenly assume for him a far greater importance than it ever possessed before. Thus had he been rewarded for his well-timed amiability. He had gained an idea of no small value from patient listening to the prattle of his wife!

"Yes," he replied, after a short silence, "I shall certainly stand. I had always intended to do so, but I've been so confoundedly busy, I've never had a moment to think. Gad! Easter falls early next

year; it only wants about three months to the election. How time does slip by, to be sure! Yes, I wish you'd call on Mrs. Tatnell, and tell her I shall be much obliged if she'd give me her vote, and get any she can for me. But it won't do to begin a regular canvass as yet. I wish you'd just mention too, that if she is really thinking of taking that house of Polson's in the Willesbury Road, she'd better let me act for her. I know a thing or two not generally known, and I'll be bound I can get it for ten pounds lower than anyone else. Of course it shall not be any expense to her."

"I know she's thinking about the house."

"Ah, well. The best thing will be for you to ask her to come and dine quietly with us next week. Then we could talk over both matters. Poor soul, I know her income is not very large. I would gladly help her if I could."

Mrs. Tatnell was accordingly duly bidden to dine with the Bullers, and take counsel with the great Octavius over matters of moment, parochial and otherwise. She was not treated to wine from what might be termed Mr. Buller's special list; but she was regaled with champagne, not of a very high price, but possessed of much sparkle and sweetness, in spite of which latter quality its effect only appeared to be to render the conversation of Mrs. Tatnell rather more acrid than usual. Many people in Monksford, could they have been invisibly present, would have reaped the benefit, if such it may be, of seeing themselves as at least one other person saw them; and if ancient sayings may be trusted, many ears should have burned, and certainly one

tongue been sorely blistered in the town that night. Under the fostering care of Mr. Buller, Mrs. Tatnell's animosity against the Mosses rose rapidly to white heat.

"You don't really mean that Mrs. Moss seriously accuses Doctor Tatnell of having mistaken her complaint, and applied injurious treatment?" he said, well knowing that any allusion to this assertion, which some of Mrs. Tatnell's dear friends were indeed wont to hint in private might possibly not be so far from the truth as some people supposed, was like stirring an arrow point in a festering wound.

"It's as true as that I'm sitting here; and then to go and say, because in his kind-heartedness my poor dear husband let the matter pass, that he was afraid to risk any inquiry! Those people are a disgrace and scandal to the town; and as for adulteration and light weight! Mrs. Tatnell finished with an expressive gesture and uplifting of her eyes heavenwards, as though no words could be found fit to express the sentiment of the moment. "There's one thing," she continued, with a sudden relapse towards the practical side of things, "which I must confess does surprise me, Mr. Buller; and that is how you can continue to deal with such people, and first-class goods and full weight, to be had with Polson and Potter."

Mr. Buller recognised the practical side of things in this remark, though perhaps not exactly in the light intended by his guest, he being well aware that Polson and Potter's business was not in so flourishing a state as it might have been; and that an increase in the number of customers was much to be desired,

if Mrs. Tatnell was to be saved from a serious risk of having, sooner or later, to choose between the unpleasant alternatives of either getting her groceries direct from Willesbury or returning to dealings with the calumniators of her departed lord. He however only gave his shoulders an expressive shrug.

"My good lady, what can one do? One can't wholly sacrifice one's comfort and convenience to one's citizenship. Polson and Potter are all very well for you; but remember they are a good distance from us, and my wife is not very strong. It would sometimes be really a serious inconvenience to her to have to go, or send, so much further. And indeed, I am bound to admit that we have never had occasion to find fault with either quality or measure of Moss's goods. I am a fellow council-man, you know, and that fact I daresay makes a difference."

Mrs. Tatnell shook her head; but whether in reprobation of Moss or disapproval of Mr. Buller's moral tone, was not altogether apparent.

"By-the-bye, about that house of Polson's," he remarked, "my wife tells me you are really inclined to negotiate for it."

"It would suit me very well. But I don't know about the rent."

"I think he wants fifty for it. It's a good house, Mrs. Tatnell; worth every penny of the money, thoroughly substantially built. That house at fifty would stand you in less than your present one at forty, in the saving of small repairs."

"It has been standing empty a long while," said Mrs. Tatnell dubiously.

"Of course it has, because Polson won't let save to

a safe tenant. Come now, Mrs. Tatnell, I tell you what you do. Go and see Polson about it, and set the matter in train. He'll ask for fifty. Then you turn the matter over to me, and I'll answer for it you shall have the house for forty. We professional men know how to manage these little matters, you know."

Mrs. Tatnell eagerly caught at the proposition, and became at once so enthusiastic on the subject of the churchwardenship, that Mr. Buller was forced to dwell very strongly on the necessity of secrecy and caution for the present; and saw her depart not without certain misgivings on the subject of the relative value of her zeal and her discretion.

On the following morning he called, quite by accident, upon Mr. Polson, to speak about some little matter of business, with exactly the mingling of dignified condescension and suavity becoming in the altitude of a professional man and a council-man toward a fellow citizen on a lower level.

"By the way, Polson," he remarked, just as he was preparing to depart, "I was looking the other day at that house of yours in the Willesbury Road. If it stands empty much longer it will go to rack and ruin, and cost you no end in repairs."

"I know that quite well, but I can't find a tenant worth having."

"What rent do you want?"

"I'd willingly take forty from a safe tenant."

"Well, look here. I can easily help you to one. Mrs. Tatnell would like to have the house very much, and she's a good lady, who dearly loves a bargain. No harm in turning these little weaknesses

to harmless account in matters of business, you know. She's coming to speak to you about it I know. Just you stick to it you must have fifty. She'll come to me, and I'll mediate. I'll make a great phrase of getting you to take forty, in consideration of a customer and good tenant, you know. She'll be satisfied she's getting the place at a rent below its value, and you'll get a safe tenant, and no harm done either way."

"Of course not, sir. A gentleman like you would of course do nothing unfair. But, as you say, we must accommodate matters a little, especially with parties as does not well understand business. I am sure I am greatly indebted to you, Mr. Buller."

"Oh, a mere trifle; don't mention it. Mrs. Tatnell will look in upon you to-day, I daresay. Good thing for you Polson, that quarrel with the Mosses. Gad! I never saw a woman so spiteful! If Moss should be elected churchwarden, I fear you'll lose a customer and a tenant. She'll have a fit of apoplexy, to a dead certainty."

"I hope not, sir, and I hope there's no chance of such an election. Of course it's a delicate matter for me to speak, being in the same line of business, but that very fact lets me into things other people don't suspect. There's business and business, Mr. Buller, sir. And I can only say this. If Moss is elected, in my opinion it'll be the greatest scandal and disgrace that's fallen on the town this long while."

"You're not the only person who thinks that. But he has a strong party. He's a substantial man is Moss; and that always tells.

“Yes, sir, he has money; that’s just it. And he knows how to make a use of exorbitant profits. I need say no more. But I understand, Mr. Buller, you are a candidate?”

“Yes. I have been strongly urged to stand; and indeed I have promised I will.”

“Very well, sir, you are safe of two votes. Mr. Potter’s of course goes along with mine. I’d vote for the dustman, to keep Moss out. And I must say, I like to see these official positions in the hands of gentlemen. Good morning, Mr. Buller, I am much obliged to you, sir, I am sure.”

On his way to his office Mr. Buller met Mrs. Tatnell. “I’ve just been sounding Polson,” he said. “He’s bent upon getting fifty for the house; and upon my word he ought, too. But I’ll get it for you for forty, never you fear.”

Mrs. Tatnell was also enthusiastic in her gratitude, and Mr. Buller was able to feel a satisfactory consciousness that his own natural ability had enabled him already to reap a substantial benefit out of the disquieting intelligence of the previous day. If he could only have relied a little more confidently on Mrs. Tatnell’s discretion! That was a disturbing reflection. But he could only console himself that from all sublunary matters a certain element of risk was inseparable.





CHAPTER XXX.

WHETTING OF SWORDS!

MONKSFORD having exhausted all it had to say in the way of opinion, conjecture, or prognostication, on the subject of the rector's intended marriage, shortly found itself reduced to a state of unslakeable thirst for further information on the subject. None was to be had from Miss Bradley. She assumed a demeanour of dignified reticence, declaring it to be quite unbecoming in her to speak at all about her cousin's affairs;—the actual fact being that she was as much in the dark as anyone else on the subject. The rector was not communicative, and the peculiar arrangements meditated prevented all need of outward and visible preparations. What changes might be in contemplation in the routine of daily life at the Court were not likely to come under the observation of Monksford; neither was it likely to become aware of what might be Miss Tollmache's designs in the matter of wedding clothes, or of her friends' and relatives' intentions with respects to presents. Everything went on very much as it had

done before the engagement. Mr. Lawrence and Miss Tollmache were occasionally seen walking or riding together, but that was not very often; and there was so little to denote a coming change, that it became hard to realise that such a change was really impending. In fact, it might have been said there was absolutely nothing to denote it, had it not been for the alteration in the rector himself. His brightened face, beaming smile, buoyant step, and that peculiar atmosphere which deep inward happiness never fails to throw around even those most reticent on the subject of their own feelings, were patent to all his parishioners, and angrily resented by a good many as an insolent manifestation of triumph in his own coming exaltation.

Under these circumstances, all the good Christians of the place were ready, as soon as the temporary distraction of Christmas festivities was over, to throw themselves heart and soul into the scratching and biting inseparable from a contest between two rival candidates for the churchwardenship.

“My dear, I’ll take the matter seriously in hand the moment all our Christmas work is over,” Mr. Moss replied to the urgent representations of his wife upon the subject. “But I don’t suppose there’ll be any contest over it. I fancy Buller’s going to be wise enough to let the matter drop quietly, as he’d best do, for his own sake; and I don’t think there’s anyone else who’ll stand at all.”

“Don’t you trust to that Buller! He’s just the man to try and undermine you in some underhand way, while pretending to have nothing to do with it at all.”

“ Well, you have more leisure than I have, and are more likely to hear what is going on. You must keep your ears open for anything you may hear.”

Mrs. Moss obeyed; and the results ere long fully justified Mr. Buller's misgivings respecting the wariness of his ardent supporter.

Mrs. Tatnell had promised to preserve rigid silence for the present on the subject of the churchwardenship,—not even to mention Mr. Buller's name in connection with the impending election, but to limit her operations to the endeavour to create or foster, as far as possible, a highly moral indignation against the generally iniquitous conduct of his rival in trade transactions, as calculated indirectly to raise a strong prejudice against his appointment to the vacant post.

This was unquestionably good policy. Blacken and defame a neighbour with an obvious reason for so doing, and though nine out of ten of your hearers will eagerly repeat what you say, it is probable that hardly one will really credit the evil report. But do it apparently without motive, and you will pretty surely raise a certain amount of prejudice against him, especially if you are an adept at assuming the while an air of subdued, slightly melancholy candour.

This programme Mrs. Tatnell had faithfully carried out to the best of her ability. But though she rigidly refrained from mentioning Mr. Buller's name in connection with the churchwardenship; when the question of the impending change began to come more prominently forward, and she heard Mr. Moss confidently spoken of as the next representative of the

parish, it was not in her to refrain from meaning smiles, significant shakes of the head, and mysterious hints that time only would show—that these things were not always so certain as people imagined—that unexpected circumstances sometimes upset the best laid schemes,—by which means she succeeded in arousing much curiosity, and a general impression that something was going on in secret; which something naturally became instantly a matter of the keenest interest and speculation.

To warn the Mosses of the probable existence of some deep-laid plot, was naturally the first thing to do. Mrs. Moss was therefore soon fully primed, and sought her husband, alarmed yet exultant; anxious on his account, yet rejoicing in this justification of her own prudent sagacity in urging him not to trust to Buller's apparent inaction. Mr. Moss listened attentively to her recital.

“Mrs. Dyer heard of it in more than one place, and she brought up the subject on purpose yesterday, when she met Mrs. Tatnell, and she says she's sure there's something up. She looked so mysterious and important, and threw out so many hints.”

“Well, it's quite possible, of course,” said Mr. Moss thoughtfully. “But it doesn't prove Buller has anything to do with it.”

“Oh, Moss, how blind you are,” exclaimed his wife impatiently. “Didn't I tell you she dined there a short time since?”

“Yes. But what of that?”

“Oh, you are stupid! Do you suppose that nasty, mean, stingy fellow Buller ever asked anyone to dinner in his life without some object in doing

so? Didn't I say, when he got Mr. Wycherley and Rose Playfair to meet there at dinner, that something would come of it? And sure something did come of it; though whatever interest Buller can have had in that business, and however he contrived to get hold of Mr. Wycherley, is more than I can ever make out. It was somehow at the races. They were walking about together that day as thick as thieves."

"Rose Playfair meet Wycherley at the Bullers'!" repeated Mr. Moss. "Why, you don't mean Mr. Wycherley ever dined at the Bullers'?"

"Lord, yes; you heard about it at the time, but I suppose you've forgotten. It was just before the ball. And the talk about the Prince after that made people forget; but its sure enough that Mr. Wycherley dined there, and that Rose Playfair went to meet him. Rose always said she didn't know who was coming; that Buller only told her a gentleman was coming about business, and he wanted someone to keep Mrs. Buller company; as if he ever thought of her. I don't suppose anyone believes that story *now*. But, as I was saying Moss, you may be sure Buller's got some underhand work going on. They never used to be so thick with Mrs. Tatnell. And she hates you. I'm sure it's enough to make one's blood run cold to think of anyone telling such lies as she tells about you! And I do hear that she's treating with Polson for that house in the Willesbury Road, and that Buller is acting for her; and a nice mess she'll find herself in, and serve her right too. The house is as damp as damp! The Burnleys never had a

day's health in it; and as for the store and linen closets, Mrs. Burnley told me, scores of times, she might as well put linen and stores in the tool shed."

The latter part of this harangue was lost upon Mr. Moss. He was used to the discursive style of his wife's conversation, and had acquired a habit of carrying on a sort of double mental action concerning it; giving his attention fully only to such parts as merited it, keeping for the rest a sort of watch over the substantives which might occur in her discourse, as signals when more careful listening might be desirable. The words "Burnleys"—"damp"—"linen closets" were quite sufficient to make him fix his whole attention on the forgotten, but now certainly noteworthy circumstances of his rival's connection with Mr. Wycherley, and the meeting between the latter and Rose Playfair at his house. How had any acquaintance between the two men first come about? And was it conceivable that Buller was in any way concerned in this elopement? Could any complicity therein be credibly fastened upon him, what an engine it would be to use against him in the impending conflict! Monksford was far too moral a town not to rise at once in righteous indignation against an abettor of such iniquity, especially when that abettor was an unimportant and not generally much-liked person. But how was any information on the subject to be obtained?

The words "rheumatism"—"coughs"—"Polson"—"sand"—"slowleaves"—had been drifting across his musings, and he had given no heed to his wife's

continued ramblings. But at length a distinct sentence forced itself upon his ear.

"You may depend, it's not without a reason that Buller's playing that way into both Mrs. Tatnell's and Polson's hands."

"How is he playing into both their hands?" he asked.

"Why, isn't he paying her no end of court? and at the same time getting her to take that house of Polson's, which he has had empty on his hands these eight months, and little better than a cellar at the best of times."

"How did you hear that she was thinking about the house, and that Buller had any hand in the business?"

"From Mrs. Parker, the laundress."

"Mrs. Parker! what, the woman in River Row there was such a row about? I thought she had gone away altogether."

"Lord, no! Why, I told you all about it. Wherever's the use of telling you anything? She made a good thing out of that business after all, poor woman. Buller went a little too far. Mrs. Huddlestone and Mrs. Daniels took it up, and I expect Mr. Lawrence got a good bit of help for her from Miss Tollmache. At any rate, among them they set her up in a nice little place just outside the town, where there's beautiful sweet air for the clothes to dry in. And when it all came to be explained, it was more ignorance than anything else was to blame with her. And there isn't a laundress in the place can touch her for starching. They send the things home as limp as an old rag one week, and like

pasteboard the next. And they always come nice from her, and such a good colour too. So she's got quite a nice little business; and her husband's dead now, which is really a good thing for her, him having to be well nigh kept. I don't suppose his work paid for his food and clothing. So she's getting on nicely, and has room for a lodger, and Buller's clerk lodges there,—it's shameful the low wages he gets—and he'd been telling Mrs. Parker about the house, and she told me when I went to pay her bill."

Clear and lucid statements of either facts or opinions were never to be expected from Mrs. Moss, and much irritation was occasionally caused in consequence to her husband. In the present instance, however, not caring to be accurately informed who was to blame for what, or for certainty as to which pronouns referred to laundresses and which to linen; and having secured the clue he wanted, he did not resent the ambiguity of language. Buller's clerk was lodging with Mrs. Parker the laundress. She certainly hated her late landlord: the ill-paid clerk presumably did not love his master. There was room for much speculation on contingent chances. The absolutely unattainable is generally supposed to be the object of specially ardent aspirations; but experience would rather show that a much desired object gains in value with the dawn of a faint possibility of securing it. Here was an unbroken chain of possibilities; and Mr. Moss's desire to unravel the mystery of Mr. Buller's connection with Mr. Wycherley's affairs grew rapidly in intensity.

"I don't suppose Buller ever paid anyone fairly in his life," he said, after a short silence. "What sort of a fellow is this clerk?"

"Oh, a very nice quiet steady young fellow, Mrs. Parker says; writes a capital hand, and is a good accountant. He's a son of Critchett's foreman, and they're but poor and have a large family. But they've done their best for them. He says he wouldn't stay a day at Buller's, but that there's a good deal to be learned which will be useful to him in getting another place, and a year or two's character is worth something."

"We're very busy with our books now," Mr. Moss replied, "and shall be for some weeks. I could easily give him some work to do after hours, if he would like to make a trifle for himself. You'd better speak to Mrs. Parker, my dear, and tell her to send him to see me some evening."

The clerk accordingly came, penetrated with gratitude to Mr. Moss for thinking of him; and was duly engaged to come for two hours on three evenings in the week, and do certain work under Mr. Moss's own direction;—a condition being appended, with evidently equal satisfaction to both the contracting parties, that the arrangement was not to be made known to Mr. Buller.

Mr. Moss did not himself bear a very high character among his regular subordinates for liberality or consideration. They were apt to assert that their work was heavy and their pay small. But the new supernumerary found, if the pay offered was not very large, that the amount of work required was small; small enough to make him, in the first instance,

wonder why Mr. Moss should have been at the trouble of engaging anyone specially to do it. He was however a youth of considerable shrewdness; and when he observed that leisure moments were often filled up conversationally, Mr. Moss lingering in the room without any apparent cause for remaining, and that any chance remarks which might happen to fall from him relative to his master and his master's business were favourably received, and invariably followed up,—and when to these observations were added sundry waifs and strays of intelligence which he picked up from his landlady or otherwise, his wonder decreased, while his sense of his own importance began to increase very considerably; his natural acuteness suggesting to him immediately that the right course for him to pursue was to make the best possible use of his advantages for his own benefit.

He began therefore to assume a significant air of mysterious reticence when any allusion was made to his master; that air whereby traffickers in small mysteries are wont silently to proclaim how much they could say if they would, and which has ever the effect of exciting a thirst for information on other people's affairs to feverish eagerness.

Heavily weighted as Mr. Moss was with ulterior reasons for the pursuit of knowledge, such tactics could not fail of success. He was soon incited to the length of a pointed question respecting Mr. Buller's proceeding. He was met by a solemn shake of the head.

"No, no, sir, you must not ask me such questions. I don't say but that things are done in that

office which would astonish many people did they know of them; but we are a very cautious house, sir. We don't let every one know what we do. And it would never do for me to let out all I know. Not but that I know it would be quite safe with a gentleman like you. Still, if any hints did get abroad, and it should transpire that I had said anything to you, you see I should be in a very awkward position; and I'm never quite certain that boy doesn't pry a little."

Mr. Moss was quite acute enough to read between the lines, and did not trouble himself with the somewhat curious reasoning set forth in this little speech. "Quite right, quite right!" he replied, "especially in such a gossiping scandal-loving place as this. I ought not to have asked you. You cannot be too cautious."

He said no more at the moment. But on the next occasion of his supernumerary's presence he remarked,—

"You are an excellent book-keeper, Wilks."

"I was always fond of figures, sir."

"Well, you know, I've been thinking, after what you said last Friday, Buller's must be a bad place. Little pay, and rather nasty work sometimes, eh?"

"You're right there, sir. My father has but poor health, and we're a large family, or you may depend I shouldn't be there an hour longer."

"No, I daresay not. Well, as I said, I've been thinking I shall want another regular hand at Easter. You might come in. Of course it won't be much at first—not much more than you get from Buller. I couldn't put you straight over the heads of

others ; but I'll soon be able to push you on. Our business increases very much, and there's sure to be vacancies. What do you say? I'll promise you a berth at Easter, so you could give Buller warning, without mentioning it, you know."

The compact was at once ratified, with much condescending magnanimity on one side, and much effusive gratitude on the other. And it proved itself forthwith a mighty moral roller, crushing out of all shape and form, conscientious scruples, prudential considerations, and all other impedimenta obstructing Mr. Moss's onward career to a useful insight into his neighbour's affairs. In less than twenty-four hours after this bargain was sealed, Mrs. Moss was armed with a powerful weapon wherewith to combat Mrs. Tatnell's adroit use of malicious slanders regarding adulteration, light weight, damaged goods, and generally questionable trade transactions, in the shape of a tale of horror, in which facts and inferences were so neatly pieced together, that it would have been hard for any one to detect exactly where the one ended and the other began.

Mr. Wycherley had taken a great fancy to Rose Playfair at the races, and having met Buller in Mr. Mostyn's stables, when Cleopatra was under inspection, had straightway, knowing him to be a resident in Monksford, hunted him up, to find out from him who she was? Buller had seen his chances, and with an amount of villany which she declared it made her quite sick even to think of, had played into his hands, bringing about an acquaintance between the two, and furthering Mr.

Wycherley's designs in every way; receiving as his reward all the mortgages on the Wycherley property, at an enormous rate of interest, coupled with certain highly advantageous rights respecting timber and outlying land.

Thus active preparations for the great coming struggle were set on foot, in a manner worthy of the stake at issue; the chorus on both sides, being much the same. Could such things be in a Christian country? At first sight it might perhaps appear that the advantage was greatly on one side. A deliberate furtherance for a definite reward of the schemes of an avowed libertine to effect the ruin of an inexperienced girl, was an iniquity, calculated both by definiteness of outline and inherent quality to rouse the indignation of the community far more effectually than more vague and commonplace deviations from the paths of commercial honesty. But then, on the other hand, it was a far more difficult weapon to handle with effect. The whole system of commercial iniquity was understood, as an abstract question, and could be easily resolved into a concrete form by mysterious looks, shrugs, hints, and innuendoes, without a word spoken which might be brought home in a direct charge of slander. But it would require great caution effectively to use, on the opposite side, the more special and distinct charge, without serious risk of unpleasant results.

It was not without some misgivings that Mr. Moss contemplated the prospect of his wife being turned adrift amidst the seethings of the Monksford social caldron, with such a risk-fraught tale in her pos-

session. But with much astuteness he conveyed a significant warning.

“You must be very careful what you say, my dear. Buller’s just the man to be down upon us. And an action for slander would be a very serious thing. Cost me hundreds, most likely.”

Mrs. Moss fully recognised the extent of this caution; thought of the coming glories of the rector’s marriage, of that charming villa with the lovely bow window to the dining-room, and the drawing-room all gorgeous with gilding and white paint; of the possible chance that some day the rector and “the Honourable Mrs. Lawrence,” would perhaps “take luncheon” there; and finally, of the heavy expense of furnishing and moving, and of the iron rigidity of her lord’s character in the matter of income and expenditure—and resolved to be very careful; feeling that any rash words on her part might possibly come to mean the rooms over the shop, with the bacon, cheese, and sugar pounding grievances, for an indefinitely prolonged period.

Monksford seemed likely to be favoured with a cheerful spring. Two events of such an exciting nature as the rector’s marriage and a briskly contested election to the churchwardenship under discussion at the same time, was a conjunction of circumstances not often vouchsafed to any country town. Expectation shed a cheering influence on even the dark gloomy days of a cold, damp, foggy mid-winter; and by the time that the still leafless trees were beginning to change their cold dead hues for those richer tints of brown or purple which are the first heralds of coming spring, the whole moral

atmosphere of the place wore an unmistakeable aspect of excited activity.

Very dreary however the winter had been in one house, where all was gloom and sorrow for the present, and dread and harrassing anxiety for the future. No word had come from Rose herself; but little had been learned about her. One friend of Kate Tollmache's thought Mr. Wycherley had passed her in a carriage in Berlin, but could not be quite certain. Another was sure he had seen him at a short distance in a boat on the lake of Geneva, and there was a lady in the boat also; but though he had made enquiries at once, he could hear nothing of him. He thought he must be travelling under a feigned name. Lewis Gwynne wrote often, and hopefully. "Don't think I've no feeling, Kate," he said; "but really I'm enjoying this hunt uncommonly. I'm awfully sorry for the poor girl; but you know one can't feel about it when it's a girl one's never seen in one's life, as one would if she was a friend or relation. I suppose then one would be too anxious and unhappy to find any pleasure in hunting them this way. It's so awfully exciting,—a world better than shooting, and all that sort of thing. I'm constantly getting on their track, and then losing it again. I expect he thinks some one will be after them, and never stays long in one place. But never fear, I shall light upon them somewhere, sooner or later." Then in a little while he wrote again.—"I've just succeeded in getting a clue now, which will give me a far better chance to trace them. I've never yet been able to find out under what name they were travelling. Now I've got it. A man I

know, who knows Wycherley, came full upon them at the corner of a street in Cologne. He was certain it was Wycherley, and seeing the girl with him, smelt a rat, and being a prying sort of fellow, tracked them, and made enquiries at the hotel where they were staying—a very second-rate one. Wycherley is evidently trying to keep out of the way of everyone who knows him. They are going by the name of “Dawson.” This fellow described the girl as fair, with very pretty features; but he said she was very pale and thin, and had a miserable frightened look on her face, which struck him at once. I shall have a much better chance now in hunting them. He must stick to the name because of passports, so I shall be able to trace them by it. The want of it has been my greatest difficulty hitherto.”

Only judiciously culled extracts from these epistles were communicated to the half-despairing father and mother. It is very hard to look at what powerfully affects ourselves from the standing point of an unaffected observer. The quiet composure of a practised physician is oftentimes indignantly denounced by frantic relatives, who would think far more highly of him if he would hopelessly ruin all his chances of affording relief to some agonised sufferer, by indulging in paroxysms of hysterical sympathy. And the fact that young Gwynne was devoting his time and wealth unremittingly to the endeavour to rescue their daughter, would hardly have saved him in Doctor and Mrs. Playfair’s eyes, had they learned that he positively found pleasure in the occupation.

Lionel Lawrence did not flatter himself that his sharp rebuke to the outspoken Mrs. Corbett had produced much beneficial result. In fact, judging by what he heard, he would rather have inclined to the opinion that irritation had only added fresh virulence to "the poison of asps;" but he was wrong. We look too much for direct results of our words or actions, and miss thereby their most important consequences, which are more apt to be oblique,—some of us being thus saved from a great temptation to self-righteous exultation, but sadly few, it is to be feared, compared with the numbers who are by this means spared, for this world, at least, a luxuriant harvest of shame and confusion of face. The rector's words had been felt to contain a stern denunciation of that line of conduct of which Mrs. Corbett was the recognised exponent, and it had clenched a determination for many wavering souls, who felt that it was at least safe to follow in the lead of your spiritual pastor, on whose shoulders might be supposed to rest a considerable share of the responsibility if he led you astray; whereas, in the opposite case, the responsibility must be all your own. Doctor Playfair had therefore not been favoured with any more such indications of rampant virtue as he had received from Mrs. Corbett, and had not the terrible anxiety of a lessening income added to his heavy burden of trouble and sorrow. Nevertheless the good Christians of Monksford felt bound to assert themselves to a certain extent. What was to become of the moral tone of society if derelictions from the paths of virtue did not receive some pointed censure?—such derelictions,

that is to say, as were indulged in by those who possessed neither wealth, rank, nor any other attribute rendering them specially advantageous to society! Christmas, therefore, brought its moral hints. Various little offerings, such as a turkey, a fine ham, or a Yorkshire pie, which had been wont to gladden poor Mrs. Playfair's heart with a lessened butcher's bill, were wanting, and no invitations came for the children to the Christmas parties at which they were usually guests. Alice Playfair, developing many sterling qualities in the fire of affliction, hushed Lucy's tearful wonderings with plausible excuses, and exhortations not to say anything before papa or mamma, who were rather worried just now about business. But poor little seven-year-old Edith was not to be thus repressed. "Why don't we have any Christmas parties this year?" she would sob. "Last Christmas we went to Clara Roberts's party, and to Amy Harrison's, and I got such pretty presents off the tree. And why don't we have a party, like we had when Rose made such pretty things for the tree, and George gave us all such beautiful presents?"

"Oh, hush, darling!" Alice would say, "you shall go to parties again some time, but it can't be this year. Don't let mamma see you crying. She has a headache" (innocent fib), "and it would worry her."

"But I will ask mamma. She ought to give us a party," sobbed the child, the spoiled pet of the house. And forthwith she burst away, and ran crying to her mother with her piteous lamentation. Only a child's grief. But let us tax our experience for the results of a sporting mishap, or a postponed

ball to ourselves, or the grown men and women of our acquaintance, and estimate a child's disappointment justly. Morality had accomplished its purpose. It had laid a chastising hand on iniquity,—only the chastisement had fallen vicariously. Lionel Lawrence, looking in that afternoon, found the mother crying, if more quietly, far more bitterly than the child had cried.

“It seems so hard upon them, poor little things! What harm have they done? and we cannot afford to give them many pleasures.”

The rector did his best at consolation, and then went his way straight to the Court. Finding Kate alone in the drawing-room, he walked up to her, and without one word of greeting, put his arms round her, and leaned his head down on her shoulder.

“What is the matter?” she asked, stroking his hair gently.

“Nothing, save that I am afflicted with a strong inclination to swear.” And he told her what he had heard, producing as result more than one of her energetic stamps.

“Why will people be so hateful?” she exclaimed. “I thought this sort of thing belonged to our ranks. This is as bad as Aunt Clanraven refusing to invite Lady Dunshannon's sisters to a ball, after she had run away with Colonel Twyford. But then one knew she had ulterior reasons. One of the girls was lovely, and much admired by a man she was trying hard to catch for Eleanor. One can understand morality getting upon its hind legs with such a pedestal to stand upon; but how can it stand rampant in this foundationless manner? Lionel, you

may consider our marriage broken off. I shall write to-day for a tub, and retire from the world to a winter retreat in the shadiest corner of the back-yard."

"Put it off at least long enough to do what I want you to do. Give these poor children a little party, and some pretty presents. I will get Mrs. Huddleston to do something for them also."

"Ah, that suggestion makes the tub look less inviting. I will not order it to-day. You shall drive me over to Willesbury instead. I will get things there instead of here. Order the pony carriage, please, while I get ready."

Thus the children were consoled, though not entirely indemnified. It was very grand to be asked to an early dinner at the Court, and to eat beautiful creams and tipsy cakes, with shining silver forks and spoons, and with servants in liveries waiting. But it was just a trifle too grand to be thoroughly enjoyable,—they not yet having reached the age when a triumphant sense of outshining their friends and acquaintance would be a sufficient solace for any want of perfectly unconstrained merriment. Miss Tollmache herself seemed such a grand lady,—it was quite awe-inspiring to receive beautiful presents from her; so, though she and the rector romped with them like children, and a tribe of little Haiggs were there, to make up a large enough party for games before tea, it was not like the jovial parties at the Colliers, or Robertses, where they were all thoroughly at their ease, and screamed and romped with a will. Then there followed a little party at The Hall, where a few children from a distance were

present, and there was more fun if less magnificence. So the sting of morality was to some extent extracted, for the children at all events; and Christmas had at least brought them more beautiful presents than had ever hitherto fallen to their share, although fun and merriment had been less abundant. Doctor and Mrs. Playfair and Alice were alone left to experience to the full the sweet influences of severe virtue; and even for them there was alleviation. Mrs. Playfair and Alice could return the cool greetings of their ostracising acquaintances with much equanimity from the vantage ground of Miss Tollmache's beautiful pony phaeton, or Mrs. Huddleston's handsome carriage; and Doctor Playfair fully appreciated Mr. Tollmache's genuine easy good-nature, when, meeting him one day near the top of the High Street, the latter turned, on some plausible pretext, and taking his arm, walked the whole length of the street with him, talking to him with a well assumed air of confidential earnestness.

"Really they are all beginning to look quite bright and cheerful again," Mrs. Corbett remarked one day, when the Playfairs came under discussion. "How charming to have such sympathising friends, and to possess such a happy facility for finding consolation!"

"I don't think they look at all cheerful," retorted Mrs. Buller, in whose presence the remark was made, positively roused into spirit for the moment. "I am sure Doctor Playfair has aged dreadfully; and both Mrs. Playfair and poor Alice look very sad sometimes. I think it is very good of Miss Tollmache and Mrs. Huddleston to be so kind to them."

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Buller, everyone knows you

are very kind-hearted; and of course *you* feel particularly for them. But I do assure you, it is quite a common remark that they have really contrived to turn their misfortunes to good account. I hear Doctor Playfair's practice has actually rather increased. Upon my word, if they could only get Alice to elope with one of the married officers from Willesbury, I should think their fortune would be made!"

"I think it is very unkind to say such things, Mrs. Corbett; and I think if you had any daughters of your own, you would hardly do it. And when you say such unkind things about the Playfairs, I think you don't know all that is said about your son, or you would feel more for them."

Having hurled this little shaft, poor Mrs. Buller felt so frightened at her own temerity, that she hastily beat a retreat, quite unaware that she had inflicted on Mrs. Corbett a more severe defeat than she had ever experienced, save at the hands of the rector.

"I think Mrs. Corbett is a very ill-natured woman," she said to her husband that evening. "People say she's very clever; but I think it's only in saying rude and disagreeable things; and I'm sure I don't see the use of that sort of cleverness. But I can't think, Octavius, why she should say that of course I felt particularly for the Playfairs. Can you? I thought poor Rose was a very sweet girl, but still they were no particular friends of ours."

"I don't suppose she meant anything at all," Mr. Buller replied. But nevertheless he laid that

remark aside in his mind, ready for future reference. It caused him a vague sense of uneasiness, although he could not have told why it did so. It was clear, however, that if it contained any meaning at all, it was one bearing in some way upon his affairs; and the most trivial remarks, with such a reference, were never likely to be neglected by the great Octavius Buller.





CHAPTER XXXI.

“CRY HAVOC! AND LET SLIP THE DOGS OF WAR.”

THE sombre season of Lent was much enlivened that year in Monksford, both by existing circumstances and exciting anticipations. It had been made known that the rector's marriage was to take place immediately after Easter, and on Easter Monday the great churchwardenship question would be settled. The rival candidates were preparing for the contest with right good will, each loudly sounding the note of defiance on the trumpet of lofty moral purpose.

“It is a post I have no personal desire to hold,” Mr. Moss emphatically declared. “It can be no advantage to me to do so. I do not take up mortgages, or advance money at high interest, or lend myself in any way to any such transactions as might render it advantageous to me to make such a position an opportunity for pushing myself into the notice of a certain class of the neighbouring gentry; and the office, here at least, is weighted with responsibilities and duties which cannot fail to be irksome and harassing occasionally to a man with a large and

constantly increasing business on his hands. I simply feel it my duty, as a man and a citizen, to do all that I possibly can to prevent the possible results of this election being such as my private acquaintance with little-known circumstances leads me to believe would be a disgrace to the town, and, in the end, probably most disastrous to many of the interests involved."

This masterpiece of rhetoric, as it was deemed by Mr. Moss and his admiring wife, was the result of many laborious hours, and a vast expenditure of ink and paper; and having been duly committed to memory by the former, was now safely locked away in his desk, ready for reference if necessary. Its careful delivery, on more than one convenient occasion, as the expression of Mr. Moss's sentiments, had not been without its effect.

"That's clearly a speech got off by heart," said one man to another. "Moss wants to imply more than it would be quite safe to say. What on earth does he mean by private acquaintance with little-known facts, and all that?"

"Nothing at all. For all his heroics, he's dying to be churchwarden, or his wife is dying to be Mrs. Churchwarden,—it may be either; and it's all a get up, to damage his rival's chance."

"I don't know about that! I think he may know something. I've always had a suspicion Buller was rather a shaky sort of fellow; and there's the trusteeships of the Bennet Hospital and the Wycherley Almshouses. You know it might be risky. Moss is a conceited ass; but I believe he's an honest man. I think it would be safest to vote for him."

"Well, I don't know. I don't think much of either.

In that drainage business, for instance, it always struck me one was pretty near as deep as the other. However, my wife tells me there is a rumour floating about that Buller is in some way mixed up with Rose Playfair's elopement. If so, that's a most rascally shame. I've a great mind not to vote at all, unless some other candidate should come forward."

Mr. Buller was no less ready than his rival. "Of course," he said, "the churchwardenship can be no possible object to a professional man like myself. A gentleman coming to speak to me on some point of business connected with the church or parish, would not, in passing through my office, be reminded of household requirements, or be tempted to rash experiments with 'superior articles' or 'unrivalled excellence.' The office of churchwarden here is an onerous and irksome one, involving many inconvenient calls upon a professional man's time. Still I cannot sit quiet when our town is threatened by what I cannot fail to regard as a disgrace and disaster. The very low tone of what our leading journals call 'trade morality' is universally admitted. I do not think that anyone connected with such a system should ever be placed in a position of responsibility connected with the church, and with the trusteeship of charitable funds."

"That is sailing as near the wind as I dare," Mr. Buller said to himself, when he had roughly noted down these words; and they too did service.

"Indeed, my dear," said at least one careful housewife to her lord, after hearing of these remarks, "there's a great deal of truth in what Mr. Buller says. It's quite dreadful the things one sees in the papers

about adulteration of food; and I believe it's worst of all in groceries. I'm sure it quite frightens me sometimes to think what the dear children may be eating, and dear little Susy's stomach so delicate too! And I really do think, sometimes, the things that come from Moss's are not what they should be for the price, and *very* close weight too. I don't see how any man who has been, as you may say, brought up to cheating, can be fit for such a post. I am sure you had better vote for Mr. Buller."

These rival statements were of the nature of brief abstracts, which the working agents on each side were left to amplify and explain according to their respective ability; and here in one respect Mr. Buller had greatly the advantage over his rival. His battle was not fought more energetically or untiringly, but it was fought with a far smaller amount of personal risk. He was in no way trusting his cause in the hands of the woman for whose sayings and doings the law cruelly held him responsible. Mrs. Tatnell, incited by hints of future advantages in the matter of landlord and tenant arrangements, was spreading reports detrimental to his rival's character, and encouraging others to do the same, with such sedulous activity, that she was actually beginning herself to believe a great deal more of what she said than she had ever done before; and to entertain a firm conviction that she was solely influenced by regard for the welfare of the town. But if she or others did exceed the bounds of prudence, and draw down retribution on themselves in the shape of actions for slander, what did that matter to him? What was easier than to repudiate them entirely,

and leave them to suffer for their own folly? No such comforting assurance could the unfortunate Moss lay to his soul, and anxious dread sat often by his sleepless pillow. Causelessly however! Strong temptation, it is true, had his wife often endured to proclaim undisguisedly the iniquities of the infamous Buller. But ever a vision arose of that charming villa with the bow windows, and of lovely carpets and curtains which she had seen at Dyson and Dyer's, to warn her back from such ruinous candour into the safer region of hints and innuendoes.

That she had not wielded these weapons altogether unsuccessfully, Mrs. Corbett's pointed remark to Mrs. Buller proved, and much evidence could also have been brought forward to show the activity of the opposite party. For a while, however, the external aspect of things remained serene; but indications were not wanting that the atmosphere was becoming so heavily charged with combustible elements, that some explosion was inevitable before very long. It was probably deferred longer than would otherwise have been the case, by the fact that several of the ladies of the town, being professors of sound church principles, were in the habit of dropping their "afternoons" during Lent; thus cutting off many opportunities for the meeting of explosive incompatibles. At length, however, charity brought to pass that which sound churchmanship had aided to repress.

Mrs. Daniels, the wife of the retiring churchwarden, and manager of the leading bank in Monksford, was treasurer and secretary to the Monksford Coal and Blanket Charity. A brief statement of the work of

this charity each winter, with a balance-sheet, audited with agonised perplexity by one of the bank clerks, and duly attested on his solemn declaration that he believed it was all right, by the signature of Mr. Daniels himself, was always appended to the annual Parochial Report published at Easter. As a necessary preliminary step to publication, this statement and balance-sheet were submitted for approval at a meeting of the managing committee of this excellent institution, convened at Mrs. Daniels' house, generally about mid-Lent. These meetings were a source of much anxiety and general mental disquietude to Mrs. Daniels, a placid, easy-going woman of neutral characteristics, possessing neither promptness nor firmness sufficient to overawe and restrain unruly demonstrations, resulting from the clashing, on these occasions, of the professional and trade elements of the town,—the former always on the alert to demonstrate clearly that it was only in the special department of charitable institutions, that a meeting on any terms of implied equality could be tolerated for a moment; the latter equally watchful to assert the "just as good as you" theory, and to resent instantly any attempt at repression.

"It is really dreadful," she bitterly complained to her husband; "it makes me quite ill. If Mrs. Moss or Mrs. Dyson happen to come first, and take a comfortable seat near the fire, Mrs. Corbett or Mrs. Collier are sure to be offended; and if any of the trade people come late, and have to sit near the door, they sulk, say they are treated like servants, and probably withdraw their subscriptions. What can I do?"

Mr. Daniels gave his shoulders an expressive shrug, and went off to the bank, blessing his stars he was not secretary to a ladies' committee.

On the present occasion Mrs. Daniels' heart felt heavier than usual. She saw the peril she was powerless to avert. It was more than likely some member of the committee would hazard some remark upon Mr. Daniels' retirement from the post which he had held for many years, and strong partisans of both the rival candidates would be present.

The committee mustered strong that morning, more than one wearing a dangerous air of being fully charged. Mrs. Daniels manfully strove to meet the exigencies of the case. She dragged forward every possible subject connected with the charity, in hopes that prolonged discussion might stave off the danger, until the calls of domestic duty should force the assembly to disperse. But she reckoned without her host when she buoyed herself up with such delusive anticipations. Mrs. Corbett had come fully bent on mischief, and had no intention of being thwarted. Never had there been such an apparent inclination for rapid despatch of business. Mrs. Daniels had reached the utmost limit of her resources long before the clock gave hopes of safety. At last there was a pause. Business was clearly over, and a little chat over things in general was a very common conclusion of the proceedings.

"Are we really to lose Mr. Daniels' service as churchwarden this Easter?" Mrs. Corbett asked, speaking across half the room to Mrs. Daniels, so that not a word might be lost.

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Daniels nervously. "I

thought that was quite understood. He has held the post a long time, and it is, you know, an arduous one. He thinks, too, a change will be better for the place."

"There I can't agree with him. I supposed from all I heard he intended to resign, and I am very sorry for it. The loss of a churchwarden of Mr. Daniels' position and character will prove, I fear, an irreparable one to Monksford."

"Well, Mrs. Corbett," dashed in Mrs. Tatnell, "I think, considering that, with the exception of Miss Witham and myself, every lady present is the wife of some gentlemen belonging to Monksford, such remarks are not very polite. Of course we all regret much losing Mr. Daniels' services; but I think it is going too far to imply that there is no gentleman in Monksford worthy to succeed him."

"I neither said nor implied anything of the sort, Mrs. Tatnell. The fact that I am myself the wife of one of the gentlemen of Monksford, is quite enough to show the absurdity of such an inference being twisted out of my words. I must say, however, that I cannot regard the candidature of the gentleman whose cause you are advocating so actively as any reparation for the loss of Mr. Daniels."

"Indeed? Well, there is a choice of candidates. Mr. Corbett will be able to record a vote for a candidate whom, it is to be hoped, he may find more to his liking."

"Mr. Corbett does not intend to vote at all," replied his wife. This was true enough, she having willed that he should not. She had, in the first instance, intended he should vote for Mr. Moss, under the

impression that a tradesman would be less agreeable, as parish churchwarden, to the rector and his fashionable wife than a man in Buller's position; little aware that Miss. Tollmache was sufficiently blinded by patrician ignorance to be quite incapable of discerning fine shades of distinction, and classed the whole business and trade element of Monksford together, in the one all-embracing category of "the town people,"—being quite ready to hold out the right hand of fellowship on the narrow ground of personal characteristics, regardless of all class distinctions. But subsequent considerations had decided her to hold a neutral position, as one enabling her to play, to more advantage, her character of outspoken woman.

"Is that manifesting a laudable interest in all which concerns the welfare of the town?" asked Miss Witham, with a little sarcastic intonation.

"Yes, Miss Witham, negatively. The only course open to Mr. Corbett, seeing that his well-known tendency to asthma renders it impossible for him to offer himself as a candidate. I should be sorry unnecessarily to hurt Mrs. Moss's feelings, but I really feel it to be my duty to make it known, generally, that Mr. Corbett and myself regard with the strongest disapproval the manner in which this canvass is being carried on on both sides."

"Oh, pray don't trouble yourself to consider me," said Mrs. Moss, with a slight titter, intended to be contemptuous, but more suggestive of nervous excitement. "No one who has lived as long as I have in Monksford is likely to be very thin-skinned. Of course," she continued, with crushing irony, "it

is a great misfortune to us to have incurred the displeasure of Mr. and Mrs. Corbett; but we must manage to bear it. My husband, I'm thankful to say, is not the man to let anyone's opinion stand in the way of his doing his duty; and his duty it certainly is that he's doing now, as every right thinking person must admit."

"Really, ladies," interposed Mrs. Daniels, making a last despairing effort for the preservation of peace, "such discussions are quite out of place here. We are met for business only."

"I beg you pardon, ma'am," replied Mrs. Moss with spirit. "I'm sure I'm the last person to wish to annoy any lady in her own drawing-room; a thing I'm sure no lady would wish to do. But it isn't to be supposed I'm to sit by and say nothing when my own husband is attacked this way. You wouldn't like it yourself, Mrs. Daniels."

"My dear Mrs. Moss, I am quite sure Mrs. Corbett had no intention of any personal reference to Mr. Moss. Of course, he is not responsible for the sayings and doings of people who may be anxious to see him elected."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Daniels," interposed Miss Witham, almost trembling with eager anticipation, in contemplating the chance she thought she discerned of getting Mrs. Corbett into difficulties,—“but I for one must say, I think Mrs. Corbett is bound to explain more clearly what she means. I myself fully intend to vote for Mr. Buller, whom I consider certain to prove a most active and efficient churchwarden, and I do not hesitate to admit that I have asked several friends to vote for him also. I there-

then had personally concerned in requesting Mrs. Corbett to explain more distinctly to what she referred."

"Certainly," obtained Mrs. Mowm triumphantly, also resulting in the thought that Mrs. Corbett, not daring to be more explicit, would be driven into denouncing subterfuge. "I quite agree with Miss Witham."

Little did they know the amount of plain speaking which that's usually done," she said exuberantly, "if you wish it, Mrs. Mowm, I am not responsible for any annoyance to you which may result, and there are no relations of Mr. Hullo's present. I simply mean this, that Mr. Hullo's suggestions are spreading everywhere where action must immediately be taken, about trade transactions, adulterated goods, and light weights, while his friends retort with a story about Mr. Hullo having been misled by Mr. Wycholsey to commit a sin of omission with some 'plaster'."

"My husband's character can take care of itself," replied Mrs. Mowm abruptly. "It's not to be supposed he can have such an immense and increasing business as he has, without exciting jealousy and envy," and she glanced viciously at Mrs. Brown, also one of the committee. "I only wish Mr. Hullo's character was as well known as Mrs. Wycholsey went to meet Mr. Wycholsey at dinner at his house."

"Not less than if you like, Mrs. Mowm," said Miss Witham. "He commits no fault. No one certainly knows that she went to meet him."

"I don't see the difference."

"Probably, but it's there all the same. I'm obliged

by your conduct, Mrs. Corbett, though I must confess I should not have expected you to be so well up in all the low gossip of the place. I discuss such things as you said, but I cannot understand respectable people hearing them. You are not very cautious. I must say, 'There are such things as women for slander.'

"Oh, you won't frighten us with such a low word thrown as that! Mr. Mann would think twice about such a proceeding when he reflects that Cotton, his late foreman, is in Mr. Corbett's employment now; and Mr. Buller probably knows quite as well that his clerk, if put on oath, would be forced to admit he had distinctly heard some Playfair's name mentioned when Mr. Wychurley and his master were drinking together in the room behind the office. It's not at all with the truth of these stories I'm concerned, but with the fact of vindictive attacks on personal character being used as weapons in a contest of this kind. When candidates show themselves capable of sanctioning such conduct, I think the only thing for respectable people to do is to decline to support either."

In the midst of the mighty clamour which followed these trenchant words, Mrs. Corbett rose, said good-bye to Mrs. Daniels, and with a nod to one or two acquaintances who were standing near the door, walked calmly out of the room. Poor Mrs. Daniels, almost in tears, implored, remonstrated, and involved herself in endless contradictions, in her attempts to allay the storm, which, as everyone talked and no one listened, she might just as well have left to take its course.

The assembly soon dispersed, and then Mrs. Tatnell made her way, as fast as her girth and asthmatic tendencies would allow, to Mr. Buller's office. It was long before excitement and breathlessness would allow her to give him any coherent account of what had passed, and even then the recital was confused and fragmentary, failing, as may naturally be supposed, to make clear to him the one piece of information which it would have been most important for him to secure. He gathered that through tampering with his clerk, the knowledge had been secured by Mrs. Corbett and others that he had had business transactions with Mr. Wycherley; and that he was accused of having asked Rose Playfair to meet him at dinner. But the fact of Wilks having, according to Mrs. Corbett, declared he had heard Rose's name mentioned between them, was in no way made clear to him by his faithful ally. Even what he did understand made his jaw drop and his colour change, although Mrs. Tatnell was too much excited to notice the fact. To her he put a good face upon it, affecting to laugh at the idea that any sane person would for a moment give credence to such an absurd slander.

When, however, he was fairly rid of his staunch supporter, suddenly transformed for the moment into his most dire tormentor, a marked change came over his demeanour. "That infernal scoundrel," as he mentally designated the treacherous Wilks, was out, so he had no occasion to dread his prying tendencies. He walked up and down the narrow limits of his *private room* with hasty impetuous steps, and every

mark of violent mental disturbance, breathing dire mutterings respecting all created things.

He had indeed received a very severe shock, a present blow, in which he clearly discerned a presage of possible future evil. But he did not recognise therein the outstretched clutch of Nemesis; only an unjust dispensation of unmerited calamity. In the somewhat distorted mirror held up before him by Mrs. Tatnell, he saw himself, for the moment, as others saw him, in their confused misapprehension of aims and ends. He had connived at the sacrifice of Rose Playfair, because he deemed that his own interests demanded that sacrifice, but regarding it all the time in the light of a distressing necessity. And now, in the kaleidoscope of Monksford beliefs, he found himself charged with having undertaken to further the libertine projects of Mr. Wycherley, in consideration of the receipt of a handsome bribe. It had never crossed his mind to dread for a moment that his transactions with Mr. Wycherley should become public; and he suddenly woke to find they were the theme of universal comment, in a perverted form, likely to be far more detrimental to him than even the fullest knowledge of facts would have been. Most bitterly he cursed the hour when he had asked Rose Playfair to meet Mr. Wycherley at his house; but he cursed it only as unlucky. Octavius Buller, in his own eyes, was never faulty, only sometimes cruelly unfortunate. That one undeniable fact was the prop and stay of the whole fiction. At mere assertion he would have laughed; but there was no laughing at assertion which could point triumphantly at such incontrovertible fact in

support of its veracity. If, moreover, this story gained lasting credence, it was not only his present aims, but all his future dreams which were threatened. That longed-for day when Wycherley Court should become his own, would only give fresh support to these aspersions on his character; and how could he then hope for the suffrages of his fellow men? He would surely find himself left to utterly solitary and unenvied possession of his magnificence!

Yet what steps could he take in his own defence? Positively none. Mrs. Corbett had spoken the truth, and he knew it. He dared not threaten the most active promulgator of this story with the terrors of the law, lest defiance should bring to light the fact that he dared only to threaten. He could not even venture on the poor consolation of giving Wilks a week's salary, and then kicking him out of the place. He was as powerless as furious, and poor Mrs. Buller might safely count upon having an evil time of it for a good while to come. On her, at least, the bitterness of his soul could be poured out with perfect safety.

While Mr. Octavius Buller thus meditated in savage gloom, his rival's state of mind was little more felicitous. Mrs. Moss had rushed home in a state of excitement naturally so much more violent than that of Mrs. Tatnell, that it alone rendered her nearly as incoherent as was the other, under the added influence of asthmatic breathlessness. In fact, she was obliged to seek the relief of hysterics and sal-volatile before she could in any way make clear to her startled lord what had occurred.

"It's the most infamous shame," she exclaimed, when at last she had managed to give him some understanding of the state of the case. "I suppose when that wretch Buller is so bad himself, it's no wonder he tries to make other people out bad; and of course Mrs. Tatnell hates us, that's but natural, with me always here a living proof—and a wonder I am living, too — of what sort of doctor her husband was. But Mrs. Corbett to come out with it that way before everyone! It'll be all over the place that you're a downright swindler, her talking that way about Cotton,—a nasty sneaking fellow I always thought him! But you'll threaten an action, won't you?"

"I'm afraid, my dear, it wouldn't be wise."

"Not threaten them? Oh, Moss, whatever are you thinking of? Why, everyone'll say it's because you daren't!"

"My dear, we can't help what people say. And you don't quite understand."

"I'm sure I understand very well that you ought to show them at once that you're not afraid; that your way of doing business will bear anyone to look into it as much as ever they please. Not like Buller's, of course."

Mr. Moss smiled, a sickly sort of smile.

"Ladies often think they understand more than they do, my dear. It's not a consideration how my business is really carried on, but how it might be made to *appear* to be carried on. There are matters in the highest class houses which, if maliciously stated, can always be made to wear a doubtful appearance; and Cotton, you may be sure, would be

support of its veracity gained lasting credence. He had no other aims, but all his future depended on it. That longed-for support should become his own support to these aspersions could he then hope for from men? He would surely be solitary and unenvied if he could not find a single friend in the city!

Yet what steps could he take? Positively none. Mrs. C. and he knew it. He could not be an active promulgator of the law, lest defiance should be made that he dared only to venture on the poor country week's salary, and then he would be as powerless as a man might safely count upon for a good while to escape the bitterness of his soul. He was in perfect safety.

While Mr. Octavius was in a savage gloom, his rival was more felicitous. Mrs. M. was in a state of excitement not more than that of Mrs. Tatnell. She was nearly as incoherent as she was, and the added influence of a fact, she was obliged to be clear to her startled lord

were worked with a vigour and energy not a little appalling to the less active portion of the community, and which startled the rector himself, even after some eight years of that specially clerical experience which gives to the clergy peculiar opportunities of becoming well acquainted with this particular development of human nature. The effects would have been painfully depressing to him but for two circumstances. In the first place, he was the fortunate possessor of too keen a sense of the ridiculous to escape a quick perception of the absurd side of even painful subjects of contemplation. In the second, he was on the eve of marriage with a woman in whom he recognised, not the amiable partner, the specially suitable companion of conventional matrimonial phraseology, but the one woman who had ever inclined him to credit the fable that human beings were originally created in pairs, and that for each there was but one other with whom a perfect union was possible. Under this latter condition, most other things shrink for the time in a man's mind to very insignificant dimensions.

Kate Tollmache persistently encouraged him to contemplate the ludicrous side of the spectacle, bringing a number of sporting phrases to bear upon the struggle with irresistibly comic effect, provoking thereby a little surprised disapproval on the part of Mrs. Huddleston, always gentle and kind, but always disposed to take a mildly serious view of life.

"It's all up with Plans and Leases," Kate said to her one day. "He's beginning to go heavily already, and Cheese and Bacon hasn't even been called upon yet. You may depend we shall see him come in on

Easter Monday at a canter, with a clear head or two to spare."

"How can you say such things?" Mrs. Huddleston said. "It is really too dreadful to be laughed at. It is creating quite a scandal in the town."

"I laugh in order to make Lionel laugh. It is energy of action that is wanted from him, not mournful depressed contemplation. You may be sure the two are incompatible, and that nothing helps the former like a good hearty laugh."

Certainly there was no lack of energy on the rector's part; and he was naturally the object of furious attacks on both sides, as being false to his oft-declared determination never to interfere in any way respecting the election of parish churchwarden,—it not being given to either party to discern the difference between interfering in the election, and energetically protesting against the manner and spirit in which the canvass on both sides was being conducted.

He had an evil time of it. Monksford, whether acting collectively or individually, was for the time equally afflictive. Severe animadversion on his conduct in interfering at all, by no means hindered each party from sending explanatory deputations to wait upon him, in order to set forth the extreme reluctance with which they saw themselves forced to meet the malignant slanders of their opponents, by showing the true character of the candidate supported by those opponents,—and the joy with which they would see themselves relieved from this painful necessity, if the rector could only, by the use of his influence, induce their antagonists to drop

this really distressing method of carrying on the contest. His steady refusal to entertain this view of the subject was, of course, indignantly denounced by both parties, as a most discreditable manifestation of culpable indifference to the welfare of his parish; carrying with it, however, the comforting assurance, that henceforth any evil results of this embittering contest could be fairly laid to his charge. As he refused to interpose to restore peace, he was clearly responsible for the issues of continued war. Then, also, many peaceably disposed, but limp-minded, harassed, or frightened units, burdened with a right to vote, and bewildered by clamorous assaults, besieged him almost daily for advice. Mrs. Campbell, the young well-dowered widow of the late elderly principal brewer of Monksford, whose youthful appearance and extreme fairness had successfully carried her weeds into the second year of her widowhood, stopped him one day on the river walk in a state of tearful agitation, which she felt was most becoming to her Madonna style of beauty, and calculated to produce a general effect, capable, if of nothing further, at least of forcing him, even at the eleventh hour, to draw a mental contrast between such exquisitely feminine charms, and the, in her eyes, masculine style of Miss Tollmache's beauty, by no means favourable to the latter.

"What shall I do, Mr. Lawrence?" she said.
 "Pray advise me. I have been so long to ask you. It is really quite distressing. I never before heard of ladies being asked to vote for the election of a churchwarden. And now here is Miss Wigham

insisting that I must vote for Mr. Buller, and saying the most dreadful things of Mr. Moss. And then some gentleman—I forget his name—coming to urge me to do all I can to prevent the election of such an unfit person as Mr. Buller, by attending to vote for Mr. Moss. Do you think I ought to vote?"

"Really it is a question I cannot undertake to answer. I cannot interfere on such a point."

"But ought ladies to vote at all? It seems to me so—so—" and the long eyelashes drooped most becomingly—"well, so unfeminine!"

"I cannot take upon me to decide how far ladies, who are householders, are fairly open to being called upon to fulfil the duties of householders," replied the grimly unsympathetic rector.

"Could I not send my vote?"

"Certainly not. You must appear in person."

"How dreadful! But shall you be there, Mr. Lawrence?" And the beautiful eyes raised themselves to his face, with a world of mute entreaty in them.

"Certainly. I shall be in the chair, and have also to nominate my own churchwarden."

"Oh, then, would it be possible—? Might I go with you? Then I should not mind."

"I fear it would be quite impossible. My duties on that occasion would render it quite out of my power to have the honour of escorting you. But as the votes of ladies appear to be in requisition, there will doubtless be some voting on each side, so that you will, no doubt, easily be able to secure a companion."

“I suppose I must try and arrange something of that sort then. But it is a most unpleasant necessity to me,” replied the fair widow with a sigh, gazing past the rector’s shoulder, up the reach of the river, with an air of pensive thoughtfulness,—very perfectly conscious that Mr. Lawrence was looking steadily at her, and very entirely deceived as to the thoughts which prompted such close observation. She imagined him noting, with ardent and regretful admiration, the dove-like eyes, beautifully rounded cheek, and delicately cut mouth, of which she was herself unfailingly conscious, and forced into drawing a disparaging contrast between her delicate loveliness and the more majestic attractions of his own ill-advised choice: and she carefully avoided any interference with the possible course of such reflections, by meeting and thus interrupting his close scrutiny. Alas! Lionel Lawrence was not thinking at all of Kate Tollmache, and only indirectly of Mrs. Campbell herself. His thought at the moment being simply,—“How very like what Rose Playfair would have been in a few years!” and his desire—to escape from this semi-pastoral ministration as soon as civility would allow.

“Yes, I suppose it must be so,” she repeated, after supporting the character of pensive model as long as was possible without the situation becoming overstrained. “But, oh, Mr. Lawrence,” and the soft eyes were turned upon him once more with pleading pathos, “it is very hard to be a widow.”

Mr. Lawrence was growing impatient; under which circumstances his habitual courtesy was apt sometimes to become streaked with bluntness. “I

should think the hardship easily remediable," he replied, a little shortly.

She shook her head, and the pathos deepened into positive sadness. "Oh, no, no! I used sometimes to think so, but not now. As one grows older, the number of those one can really love and esteem does not increase. I never think of that *now!*" Then she caught her breath a little hastily, as though she had gone a little too far, and with a charming blush added, "But this is quite beside the mark. Pray tell me for whom you are going to vote?"

"I do not vote at all. I simply appoint my own churchwarden."

"Oh, I am so sorry! I should have felt so certain I was in the right if I could have followed your lead. And you will not advise me?"

"Certainly not," answered the rector, whose stock of patience was dwindling very rapidly. "If you want advice, I should recommend you to consult Mr. Huddlestone or Mr. Daniels. Both are sensible men, and thoroughly understand the situation. There are many reasons for my not making any suggestions. Good morning."

He raised his hat, and turned away as he spoke.

"How brusque he grows," the fair widow said to herself as she pursued her walk. "Poor fellow! that does not look well; but I am sure I hope he will be happy, though I should think Miss Tollmache has a most imperious temper." And Mrs. Campbell henceforth assumed a tone of such sympathetic, regretful tenderness in speaking of the rector, that even in the present preoccupied condition of Monksford society, the question began to be mooted

whether it was not quite possible that she had actually refused him and that his sudden and unexpected engagement might after all be the result of haste.

She was not the only seeking soul who found the pastor a broken reed in those days of agitated perturbation. And how he could reassure it with his kindness, not at once to rise counsel with the peace-loving minority, and encourage to get forward some firm candidate and thus give some chance of escape from the scandal, was more than Mrs. Corbett could understand.

"It is all very well to say," she remarked to her husband, "that the election of parish churchwarden is a matter in which the pastor should not interfere. But there are exceptions in every rule. And it's my belief in this case the man is only put forward to cover their indifference. I suppose in future we shall see a strange thing all the while, and the pastor visiting all about the country, and entertaining at home, with no more regard to attend to any such parish concerns as the interests of his parish. What I must say, if there is one thing I least more than dislike, it is a worldly-minded clergyman."

"The question of putting forward a third candidate has been fully discussed," replied her husband calmly.

"When? where?" she asked in much astonishment.

"It is a meeting held privately at the mayor's house. Mr. Lawrence was there and fully agreed with us all that under the circumstances it would

be a mistake, and likely, whatever the actual result might be, to produce more harm than good."

"I never heard anything of it."

"No, my dear. You ladies don't invariably know everything that is going on," replied Mr. Corbett, who did not always entirely approve the conduct of his outspoken wife, though experience, combined with asthma, rendered him chary of remonstrance.

"And that's the way Mr. Lawrence doesn't interfere," said Mrs. Corbett, much nettled at finding she had been left in temporary ignorance of the march of events.

"I thought you implied just now he was to blame for not interfering."

"I am not talking about whether he is to blame or not, but about his own professions. If there is one thing I hate it is inconsistency. I like to see a man act as he professes to act."

"Oh, I understand!" and Mr. Corbett took up the paper.





CHAPTER XXXII.

DEFEAT IN VICTORY AND VICTORY IN DEFEAT.

THE thoughts of Mr. Moss subsequently to the eventful meeting at Mrs. Daniels' house had naturally dwelt much upon Mrs. Corbett's bold assertions respecting Mr. Buller's clerk. No one, of course, knew better than himself the exact proportion of fact out of which were manufactured the injurious stories respecting his rival, which were being energetically used on his behalf. The actual amount of information he had received from Wilks, had been confined to the fact of Mr. Buller's having taken up the Wycherley mortgages; the rest of the adroitly concocted tale had merely resulted from the suggestive nature of the well-known meeting of Mr. Wycherley and Rose Playfair at the Bullers' house. Wilks had never mentioned her name, or thrown out the faintest hint at her being in any way connected with the Wycherley and Buller transactions. If he were really able to swear, as asserted by Mrs. Corbett, why had he concealed the fact from Mr. Moss? And how had Mrs. Corbett become possessed of the information?

Answers to these questions were not very far to seek, although, for the moment, none the less closely hidden from the anxious seeking of Mr. Moss. When first the news of Rose Playfair's elopement had spread through the town, Mrs. Parker, who was strongly disposed to regard all possible evil as in some way due to the malign influence of Mr. Octavius Buller, stated confidentially to her lodger her firm belief that his master had had some hand in the occurrence.

"It's like enough you're right there," replied the clerk. "I heard her name mentioned when they were drinking together one day at the office."

This confidence had floated about among the lower social strata of Monksford, but had not chanced upon a lodgment in the upper formations, until the time when the great churchwarden question began to be actively agitated. Then, when the drift of Mr. Moss's overtures began to be apparent to Mr. Wilks, he astutely reserved this piece of information, determined not to allow himself to be, as he termed it, "sucked dry," until he saw himself actually provided with a permanent berth in the Moss establishment. Mrs. Parker, however, saw no harm in just mentioning the fact one day to Mrs. Corbett, when that lady paid her a visit, in order to speak about some clear starching. That visit had been paid the very day previous to the meeting at Mrs. Daniels' house, which had been productive of such momentous results, and the information had whetted Mrs. Corbett's ardour, with a strong conviction that, on one side of the contest at least, there was probably a good deal of truth in the statements put forth.

Wilks, when sharply questioned by Mr. Moss,

seeing himself checkmated with regard to his prudent reticence by his garrulous landlady, admitted the truth of Mrs. Corbett's assertion; alleging in excuse for his former silence on the point, his dread of going too far, until nearer the time when he should be free from his present service.

"How did Mrs. Corbett come to hear about it then?" asked Mr. Moss.

"I can't say, sir. I think it must be Mrs. Parker told her. I think, when there was all the talk about Miss Playfair, I might have mentioned it to her."

Mr. Moss immediately registered a mental determination that an indispensable condition of Wilks entering his service should be a change of lodging. A poor hard-working laundress might naturally be supposed to feel strongly on the subject of sugar, for instance. Wilks must clearly lodge elsewhere.

"And you are sure you heard Miss Playfair's name mentioned in the way you describe?"

"Quite certain, sir. The partition is but very thin, and you know Mr. Buller talks loud."

"You could swear to the fact?"

"If I was safe out of Mr. Buller's hands."

"Certainly, certainly. You will enter on my service at Easter. What notice must you give?"

"Only a week, sir. Mr. Buller always held to that. You see he might some day chance to hit upon some one whom he could engage for sixpence a-week less. Then it would have been a dead loss if he couldn't have made a change at once," replied the clerk, with a grim smile.

"You had better give him notice at the end of the

week then. I'll take you on at once, from the moment your engagement to him is out. You had better be free at once."

This arranged, it appeared that Mr. Wilks was quite ready to swear to the fact of having distinctly heard the name mentioned; and Mr. Moss, that same evening, sought an interview with Mr. Harrison, one of his most energetic masculine supporters, in order to arrange with him a fitting plan of action under the circumstances.

"Monstrous! horrible!" exclaimed Mr. Harrison. "The fact should be made public instantly."

"I think a better use may be made of the information by suppressing it for the time," replied Mr. Moss, smiling softly.

"You really think so?"

"I do indeed. I think this fact should be kept completely in the background until the election takes place. Buller must then be put in nomination by some competent person. Then, I think, would be the time for some independent voter to state this circumstance, having Wilks at hand to substantiate the statement if necessary, and oppose Buller's nomination, unless he can satisfactorily clear himself from the suspicions fairly aroused by this fact. I think the objection must inevitably be allowed, and then I apprehend Buller will see his only course is to retire without risking further exposure."

This course of procedure was highly approved by Mr. Harrison, who was, it appeared, quite ready to come forward as the objector. He had himself smarted under the tyranny of Buller as a creditor, and was therefore full of public spirited determina-

tion not to lose so favourable a chance of exposing him.

"That's checkmate," said Moss, smiling to himself, as he left the house, confident not only in his own election, but in the certainty of seeing his self-sacrificing exertions on behalf of the town, rewarded by the complete exposure and lasting disgrace of the rival who had sought to accomplish his ends by such nefarious means, and the confusion and mortification of all who had aided and abetted him.

These sanguine expectations could not be termed ill-founded. The charge against Mr. Octavius Buller, supported by such evidence as was now forthcoming, was much too grave to be overlooked, especially considering the nature of the post for which he was a candidate; and under the circumstances, it was little likely that he would venture to run the risk of an investigation. There would therefore be no other course open to him save to withdraw at once, and leave to his opponent an uncontested victory. But in a country town like Monksford, where everyone knows everyone, the possible limits of social entanglements are hard to calculate; and in the present case, Eros having left the field long enough to the sole possession of Ares, thought it now time to assert his traditional right to make sad havoc amidst the projects of hapless mortals.

Why Miss Witham should have interested herself actively in the cause of Mr. Buller, it would be hard to say. Probably dread of possible inferences from any apparent flagging in her interest in all parochial affairs just at the time of the rector's marriage, had

as much to do with the matter as anything else; but she had certainly used her influence energetically in endeavouring to talk all her acquaintances into voting for him, and with none had she been more urgent than with Mrs. Campbell. Mr. Harrison had not less vigorously plied her in the opposite interest. The election of a churchwarden was a matter regarded by a very considerable proportion of those whose qualifications entitled them to vote, with such complete indifference, that it was not probable, under any circumstances, that a very large number could be induced to make use of their privilege. The amount of votes to be depended upon was therefore comparatively small, so each single one was a far more important fraction of the whole, than would have been the case in an election of more general interest.

Mrs. Campbell being a person not possessed of any strong opinions, save in the important matters of costume or decoration, was much perplexed by conflicting statements. She naturally, however, inclined somewhat towards Mr. Buller. The charges brought against him were far more romantic than the vulgar common-place iniquities alleged against Mr. Moss, and had about them a sort of reflected glow of Don Juanism, which could hardly fail to possess some attraction for a young and pretty widow. Moreover, their result, granting the facts, had at any rate been the removal from the neighbourhood of Rose Playfair, a girl whose beauty was admittedly very much in her own style,—a circumstance, connected with a girl aged nineteen, not by any means satisfactory to a widow of seven-and-twenty, when

the beauty thus shared is of that fair and fragile type which is not generally very lasting, and who was already suffering from a distressing consciousness of tightness in a riding habit made about two years since.

Under these circumstances Mrs. Campbell had been speedily converted by Miss Witham, and though not active in the matter herself, had learned to feel much indignation at such infamous attempts to traduce the character of an upright, honourable man, by bribing his own clerk to bear false witness against him; feeling, in fact, that personal obligation for the result of his evil doings laid her under compulsion to manifest her gratitude by warmly defending him from the charge of having deserved it. And she had faithfully promised to attend at the vestry on Easter Monday and record her vote for him.

It chanced, however, that one of Mrs. Campbell's most devoted admirers at the time was Mrs. Corbett's before-mentioned son, irreverently termed "Ned Corbett" in common Monksford speech, and credited with much addiction to billiards, horse-racing, and similar doubtful sports. He had, indeed, resolved on matrimony and respectability in company with Mrs. Campbell and her comfortable jointure, which he had taken care to ascertain was clogged with no uncomfortable conditions respecting re-marriage, never doubting that she would see the great advantage of a union with a good-looking fellow, the only son of so wealthy a man as Mr. Corbett. Mrs. Campbell had as yet given no distinct sign; but she allowed his visits, and his evenings were very frequently passed at her house, under the sanctioning presence

of an elderly and rather deaf poor relation, in all respects an unimpeachable and most convenient duenna.

"What a shame it is for people to say such things of poor Mr. Buller," she said to him one evening, when the churchwardenship was under discussion.

"What things?"

"Why, accusing him of being concerned in Rose Playfair's elopement."

"I believe he was."

"How can you say such a thing? Ah, I know. You are spiteful. I always thought you had a little weakness in that quarter yourself."

"I had nothing of the kind," he replied, a little more tartly than was consistent with a sense of a perfectly groundless assertion. "She might have been worth something in another five or six years. But at nineteen, bread and butter is still too prominent."

"Well, she has certainly made a mess of it. I cannot think how she could be such a fool, even at nineteen. George Huddleston will be one of the richest men about here. But how can you say you believe Mr. Buller had anything to do with it?"

"I am certain he had."

"And I am certain he had not."

"I'll prove it to you. At least, as far as such a thing can be proved. I'll show you that there is evidence which amounts almost to proof." And then he told her what his mother had learned from Mrs. Parker.

"What do you say to that?"

"I don't believe a word of it. That is, I mean I

don't believe the woman. Of course your mother heard it."

"Oh, if you are going to meet everything that goes against you with a simple 'I don't believe it,' there's nothing more to be said. I can only say I don't think I ever heard a much stronger case made out against a man."

"I think nothing of the kind. The woman hates Mr. Buller. I have no doubt she was bribed by the Mosses to tell your mother that story, in hopes to secure your father's vote, which they would naturally count upon as sure to influence others."

Mr. Corbett shrugged his shoulders, the only convenient answer which occurred to him, not feeling it desirable to tell a pretty widow with a good jointure, who had not yet declared herself, that she was talking nonsense. He gave the subject no further thought; but Mrs. Campbell reflected much upon what she had heard. She cherished in secret a strong dislike to the mother of her ardent admirer, having, of course, had repeated to her some very sarcastic remarks made by that outspoken woman respecting herself and the rector; and had utterly sacrificed veracity to civility in professing to believe that Mrs. Corbett had really heard what she declared had been said to her. She was inwardly convinced the story was grossly distorted, if not wholly fabricated, and saw in it only an additional reason for cordially siding with the maligned Mr. Buller.

Mrs. Campbell had some slight acquaintance with Mrs. Buller. Social gradations were very distinctly marked in Monksford, and very jealously watched

over, and it is not for a moment to be supposed that the rich young widow, who lived in a charming house on the outskirts of the town, had a dashing brougham and beautiful pony carriage, and was waited upon by a footman in livery, could be in any way on an equality with Mrs. Buller, who lived in the High Street, with only one woman servant and a boy, and was consequently obliged to dust her own drawing-room. Nevertheless, as is common in country towns, these differences did not entirely interfere with acquaintance; such acquaintance being regarded by the higher orders as a fulfilment of the apostolic injunction to "condescend to men of low estate;" that precept being accepted in the literal sense of the translation. Mrs. Campbell being, therefore, on visiting terms with Mrs. Buller, and having secured a piece of intelligence likely to be very distressing to her, the natural consequence was that she should at once seek an opportunity of making her acquainted with it.

These acts of neighbourly kindness are generally perpetrated under strong pressure of virtuous impulse. When Mrs. Brown ascertains that Miss Jones is compromising herself most terribly with a married man, she immediately feels herself called upon to make known the fact to Miss Robinson, Miss Jones's great friend, lest that unsuspecting damsel should run the risk of contamination by any association with such a reckless offender. Mrs. Campbell was by no means behindhand in this respect. She forthwith called upon Mrs. Buller, and imparted to her what she had heard, with praiseworthy accuracy as to fact, and much sympathetic regret over the

distressing nature of the communication which she felt it only her duty to make at once, that Mr. Buller might be on his guard against the machinations of his enemies.

Shocks, like many other misfortunes, generally come in battalions. This unpleasant intelligence reached Mr. Buller immediately upon the top of another startling circumstance. His wife's indignant recital followed within a couple of hours on the announcement by Wilks, with not a bad imitation of his master's most portentous pomposity, that Mr. Buller must suit himself with another clerk, he having secured a very much better situation in Mr. Moss's establishment. This announcement alone had thrown much light upon the tactics of the foe. Mrs. Campbell's story still further illuminated the subject, and gave clearness to various disjointed outpourings of Mrs. Tatnell's, which at the time Mr. Buller had not thought it worth while to piece into a consistent whole by dint of a laborious cross-examination.

"It's a sin and a shame!" concluded Mrs. Buller. "But whatever shall you do? Of course you'll dismiss that Wilks, but you can't bring anyone to prove he didn't hear her name."

"Hold your tongue, woman, do!" was Mr. Buller's rejoinder, pacing up and down the room with a deeply preoccupied air. To have the very fact, under the consciousness of which he was smarting at the moment, thus offered in the form of a piece of mild enlightenment was too much. He had never in his life before felt himself in such an awkward position as that which he now occupied. For once he was fain to admit his prudence in adapting

means to ends, for the furtherance of his own designs, had failed him when he committed himself to such an undeniable fact as the meeting between Mr. Wycherley and Rose Playfair at dinner at his house. He had little doubt that Wilks had really heard her name mentioned on the occasion of Mr. Wycherley's visit to his office. Still, that assertion could easily have been denounced as a monstrous falsehood, got up by his enemies expressly to injure him, were it not for that most unlucky circumstance which he felt must, even in the judgment of the most absolutely unprejudiced, wear a very ugly aspect. He saw that he could count upon perfect exoneration only in the judgment of those ardent partizans whose opinions were solely a matter of feeling, not of evidence. Impartial judges would look grave; his enemies would triumph gloriously. He cursed his luck, his clerk, his client, and his client's victim with much energy and impartiality, and spent a sleepless night in considering by what possible course of action he might best meet this unfortunate turn in his affairs.

Every hour of his meditations narrowed the limits of his reflections, bringing him gradually nearer to the conclusion that there was one—and only one—course open to him. And this decision possessed at least two advantages. It relieved him from the anxiety of uncertainty, and afforded him an opportunity of disconcerting, and, to some extent frustrating his opponent's tactics.

Mr. Moss was growing quite excited over the position of affairs.

“If the fellow is only fool enough to fight,” he

said to Mr. Harrison, "we shall be able to show him up splendidly."

"There is no symptom of drawing back," Mr. Harrison replied. "His friends are canvassing more vigorously than ever. Polson and Potter are both hard at work trying to get the small tradespeople to come forward. Disgusting! What can they know about such matters? However, I don't think they'll make much of that. That River Row scandal is a regular clog round their necks with that class. They haven't forgotten it yet; and the making of the new drains is causing a lot of them no end of trouble just now. Fortunately, they don't discriminate nicely, and they lay all that annoyance to Buller's account too, saying that if he hadn't let things get so bad there would never have had to be all this fuss and bother; so he catches it on both counts."

"So much the better! So much the better!" Mr. Moss rejoined, rubbing his hands gleefully. Few of us, perhaps, have a very firm hold of the fact that even a rogue is entitled to justice, especially when it happens to make for our own advantage that his general character, rather than the special circumstances of the actual case, should be brought prominently forward.

Many hours did Mr. Moss spend in writing, re-writing, destroying, and re-arranging the important document which was to be the groundwork of the tremendous assault to be made upon his rival, so soon as he should be proposed formally as parish churchwarden for the coming year. Mr. Harrison, who had so gallantly undertaken to lead the attack,

was to rise as soon as Mr. Buller's name was mentioned, and object, stating it to be his distressing duty to draw the attention of the vestry to very painful suspicions which had been aroused, supported by facts so grave that he felt it was impossible they could be passed over in silence. This he was to follow by stating that it was indisputable that Mr. Buller had lately undertaken extensive business transactions for Mr. Wycherley; that his clerk was prepared to swear that, during an interview on these matters, he had distinctly heard the name of a young lady mentioned, who had subsequently been painfully connected with Mr. Wycherley; and that it was well known that that young lady had very shortly after been invited to meet Mr. Wycherley at dinner at Mr. Buller's house, without the presence of any member of her own family. This statement, dressed up with the usual expressions of regret at being forced by a sense of duty to drag forward facts so painful to a respected fellow-townsmen, was to end with a protest on the part of Mr. Harrison against Mr. Buller being put in nomination for such a post as that of churchwarden, unless he could offer some satisfactory explanation of these very grave circumstances.

"And what on earth will you gain by that move?" demanded Mr. Yardley, of Willesbury, a rather short-spoken legal acquaintance of Mr. Moss's, to whom he had submitted some technical question connected with the business. "You'll raise a devil of a row, that's all. If the fellow has the necessary qualifications, and people choose to vote for his appointment, he can hold the office in spite of all this scandal."

Mr. Moss smiled. "You gentlemen of the long robe"—he liked the fine-sounding term, and had vague ideas on legal distinctions—"are disposed to take a too strictly legal view of all such points. A man may be *socially* without being legally disqualified for such an office. I fully expect, as you rather baldly state it, to raise a devil of a row, resulting in the inevitable postponement of the meeting for a week, and I venture to predict that Mr. Buller, having a business character to maintain, will not again appear as a candidate."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, losing all interest in a town squabble not likely to necessitate legal interference. "Oh, if that's what you're at, I daresay you'll manage it, but I must say it looks a rum sort of affair on both sides. I've heard a good deal, and you must excuse me, Mr. Moss, if I say I don't think either of the candidates will improve his position by the line taken up in this matter."

Mr. Moss smiled, suppressed a strong inclination to remark that he trusted he was not to be charged a fee for this latter opinion, and merely saying that the line of procedure adopted in such matters frequently rendered the position of even the most honourably-intentioned candidates somewhat equivocal, forthwith took his leave.

The all-important day dawned at last, and the High Street presented a scene of the liveliest animation from an early hour, the time-honoured habit being to hold these elections in the town hall, which stood a little lower down the street than the Wycherley Court gateway, on the opposite side. The parish clerk, the beadle, and various other

officials were gathered early in and about the building, occasionally exchanging a few confidential words with each other, and sternly regarding all the outer world with glances of jealous suspicion. Half-an-hour before the appointed time of meeting, Mr. Moss was seen standing at a corner, note-book in hand, speaking with grave earnestness to Mr. Harrison and Mr. Roberts, while Mr. Smithson, an unmistakable outsider, was leaning against a lamp-post hard by, listening with modified interest to their discourse. Almost immediately Messrs. Polson and Potter were seen hurrying into Mr. Buller's house. Soon afterwards the mayor appeared in sight, in company with his retiring coadjutor, and was instantly joined by Mr. Smithson, and the three walked slowly up the street together. Then, as the hour of meeting drew near, the street began gradually to fill. Evident voters, converging from all points of the compass, met, and stood talking together in groups of three and four, and the appearance of several lady householders attracted marked attention, and comments of varied character. At length the mayor and his companions were seen returning in company with the rector himself, and there was quite a perceptible stir at the appearance of this visible representation of the spiritual, physical, and municipal interests of the town. They passed on, interchanging impartial greetings, and just as they reached Mr. Buller's house, the door opened, and that illustrious man, clad in his most irreproachable manner, himself strode forth, greeted the group with his usual studied pomposity, and at once joining them, walked with them across the street to

the town hall, which was nearly opposite to his house.

“Confound his impudence!” muttered Mr. Moss, betraying, by a sudden start, his perception of the motive of this adroit move on the part of his rival, and losing, by hurrying after them, too late to gain for himself, likewise, the prestige of entering in company with the most important members of the vestry, the only advantage left to him—that of appearing to regard the opportunity with bland indifference. “Never mind, my fine fellow, you’ll not look quite so jaunty when you come out again, I take it,” he added, by way of administering a mild dose of consolation to himself, as he followed, a shade ignominiously, a few yards in the rear of the principal group.

The entrance of the rector and churchwardens had been the signal for a general move, and a considerable amount of bustle and confusion, giving rise to much manifestation of functional importance on the part of the officials aforesaid.

At length business was fairly got under way, with the speedily settled nomination, by the rector, of Mr. Huddlestone to serve as his churchwarden for the ensuing year. Then there was a visible stir throughout the room; a sort of metaphorical standing to arms, and settling in saddles. But before anyone else had time to move, Mr. Octavius Buller rose, and begged the chairman’s leave to say a few words, which would have an important bearing on the subsequent proceedings. This innovation on the assumed programme excited some little surprise, and Mr. Moss and Mr. Harrison exchanged slightly

alarmed glances. Both were so firmly and accurately fitted into their grooves, that they felt any change in their plan of action could only be affected at the cost of violent and dangerous jolting and dislocation of ideas. Mr. Buller having, however, received a silent sign of assent to his request, at once executed a strategic movement, forcing them, as it were, to effect a complete change of front after the action was fairly begun.

It was, of course, perfectly well known, Mr. Buller said, that he had consented to offer himself as churchwarden for the ensuing year; in fact, many of the voters in Monksford had paid him the compliment of using their utmost endeavours to promote his election. It was also equally well known that he was not the only candidate who had been put forward, and out of this fact had arisen circumstances of a most unfortunate nature, which had compelled him, at the last moment, to resolve on a most unexpected course of action. It was not the time or place to make any remarks on the methods of canvassing employed, nor was he, as one of the candidates, the proper person to make any such remarks; especially as he had some cause to fear that friendly indignation at unwarrantable attacks upon his own personal character had, in some instances, incited some of his supporters to the natural, but not very desirable, course of making reprisals. But although he had been for some time aware, to a certain extent, of what was going forward, it had only been within the last few days that he had been made fully acquainted with the nature and extent of the aspersions to which his character had been subjected. They had certain-

ly been well chosen, with a view to the object they were intended to effect. He was openly accused of complicity in occurrences of a very painful nature, which had lately taken place in the town; to which accusation one accidental circumstance certainly lent some slight colouring of possibility—a fact to which, perhaps, he owed it that this special method of blackening his character had been chosen. No one who knew him would, he felt certain, for a moment suppose it possible that he would allow himself to be put in nomination for the vacant office without a thorough and satisfactory clearance of his character from such a disgraceful imputation; and how could that be effected? Only by dragging into discussion most distressing topics, now happily laid aside, at the cost of inflicting the acutest pain on those who had already suffered deeply, and were perfectly blameless in this matter. No one, he concluded, drawing himself up with an air of majestic magnanimity, who was acquainted with Octavius Buller would, he hoped, believe him capable of clearing himself of any imputation at such a cost; therefore the only course open to him was at once to withdraw from his candidature, which he begged it to be understood that he did for this reason, and for this reason solely.

Mr. Buller hereupon sat down, and there was a momentary dead silence. Mr. Octavius Buller had played a brilliant stroke, there could be no question, on that point. He was far from a bad speaker; that is to say, he possessed the faculty of stating what he wished to state clearly and distinctly, without contradicting himself, or becoming hopelessly en-

tangled in linguistical complications; and the manner which, in the daily intercourse of life, was pompous self-assertion, carried to the extent of offensive insolence, did not altogether fit ill with the character of a man indignantly repelling unjust accusations, which honourable feeling prevented him from attempting to disprove. A slight frown sat upon the rector's face. He saw the whole game as clearly as though he had been playing a leading part in it himself, and saw himself forced into the unpleasant position of being compelled, in appearance, to give credit for honourable and praiseworthy conduct to a man whom, in his secret heart, he was at the moment denouncing as a clever rascal. When at last he spoke his words were cold and measured.

“The motives you assign for your action are very creditable to you, Mr. Buller. I think, I may venture to say, that I am sure the line of conduct you have adopted will be viewed with satisfaction by everyone cognisant of the circumstances.”

The “hear, hear” which followed these guarded words was very emphatic; it being, of course, open to everyone present to interpret the approval as best pleased them, either as direct commendation of the magnanimous Mr. Buller, or as indirect satisfaction at the method of expression chosen by the chairman. Mr. Moss, however, started up in evidently violent excitement.

“Excuse me, Mr. Chairman, but I cannot let your remarks pass unchallenged. It's, as I may say, universally known that I'm the only other party coming forward on this occasion; and when Mr. Buller talks about unwarrantable attacks on his personal char-

acter, it's not what any gentleman can be expected to sit quiet under."

"Mr. Buller has made no sort of allusion to you personally, Mr. Moss. It has been a patent fact, and one deeply regretted by all right-thinking people, that throughout this canvass attacks on personal character have been used as weapons in a most unjustifiable manner."

"It is a fact regretted by no one more deeply than by your humble servant, sir. And if any gentleman or lady would have pointed out to me any party that did it on my behalf, I should at once have requested that party to desist from any further attempt to secure my election. But I still say, sir, that Mr. Buller has made a most ungentlemanlike"—
"Indirect," prompted Mr. Harrison, in a whisper—
"indecent attack upon me."

"Order, order! Mr. Moss, I cannot allow this. Mr. Buller never in any way implicated you in what he said."

"Not directly, sir; but indirectly," retorted Mr. Moss, chancing at last upon the right word; "and it's all very well for him to shelter himself behind, not causing pain to them that isn't to blame. But to my thinking there are circumstances when a gentleman, if he wishes to be continued to be thought such, is bound to clear his character at all costs. That's to say if he can. If he knows he can't—why then, of course, kind feeling is as good a help out of a difficulty as he could well hit upon."

"Mr. Moss," said the chairman, sternly, "I cannot allow this discussion to be carried any further. We are met to-day simply to elect churchwardens for

the coming year. Mr. Buller has stated his reasons for declining to stand, in a manner to which I think no reasonable exception can be taken. If you feel yourself personally aggrieved, that is a matter for consideration under other circumstances, but certainly not one for discussion here. I must request that the business in hand be allowed to proceed without further delay."

Mr. Moss showed mutinous hesitation for a moment, but was almost pulled down into his seat by Mr. Harrison. "Be quiet," he whispered; "you'll only make bad worse." So Mr. Moss succumbed, solacing himself with indignant mutterings.

The subsequent proceedings were not very long, and Mr. Moss left the town hall duly elected churchwarden for the coming year. But, alas! not with all the triumph which he had fondly anticipated. He had intended to leave it not only victor in a gallantly fought contest, and therefore evidently victorious through merit alone, but he had meant to leave behind him a thoroughly humiliated foe, not only conquered, but severely damaged in character. And now he was walking homewards victor by default alone, leaving his rival more than half victorious in his defeat; the exponent of sentiments which every right-thinking person must approve, and already receiving hearty laudation from his friends, or his rival's foes, as the case might be, for his honourable conduct, and the noble self-abnegation he had shown.

"Didn't I tell you that Buller was just the fellow to undermine you in some underhand way?" said his wife, after listening to his recital; finding in the

power to make that remark much consolation for inevitable disappointment. "Well, you are churchwarden, at any rate."

"Yes; and have given that fellow Wilks a berth to no purpose."

"Turn him off."

"Buller would hear of it." And the new churchwarden heaved a sigh, feeling that honour and glory have their dark side; and that the luckless Wilks would in future represent to him one of those hard nobs which are supposed to stud the pillows on which crowned heads repose.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

HAD THE TREATY SECRET ARTICLES?

MR. OCTAVIUS BULLER'S tactics for that important day were far from being solely restricted to the delivery of his carefully prepared speech in the town hall. His experience during the course of the present business had taught him fully to estimate the necessity for concerting his measures with the strictest secrecy, while, at the same time, if their full result was to be secured by subsequent laudations of his noble and disinterested conduct on the part of his supporters, it was equally necessary the latter should receive some satisfactory explanation and solid consolation for the unexpected mine which had been sprung upon them. Not even the most ardent of them could be expected to regard with entire equanimity the fact of having been allowed to continue to the last their efforts on his behalf, when he had taken a resolution which rendered all those efforts fruitless.

Under these circumstances, Mrs. Buller received orders to prepare luncheon, on a scale the mere

contemplation of which almost took her breath away.

"Everything cold, remember," had been Mr. Buller's injunctions, "except soup, so that no servants need be hanging about. Chickens, tongue, pigeon pie, ham, plenty of lobster salad, jellies, and creams—all that sort of thing, and all of the best."

"Very well, Octavius, and what soup?"

"Oh, you need not mind about that. I shall have turtle. It will be sent in."

Then Mrs. Buller knew that something indeed important was on foot, and she toiled accordingly; and when, about two o'clock on the day of the meeting, some seven or eight hungry guests assembled in the dining-room, a luncheon was awaiting them well calculated to restore ordinary humanity to good humour, after much more severe provocation than that of the moment.

The guests were hungry, the fare excellent, and Mr. Buller's most suitable wines circulated freely, he wisely keeping the conversation directed to general topics, until these important factors in the great game of life had had sufficient time allowed them for their secret but mighty action. When he saw a touch of aristocratic hauteur in Miss Witham, and a shade of more plebeian stiffness in Mrs. Tatnell thawing into friendly cordiality, while a slight tendency to silent reserve on the part of Messrs. Polson and Potter was changing perceptibly into general loquacity, he felt the hour was come, and seizing the first pause which occurred in the general chatter, begged leave to say a few words.

These words consisted of explanations, and expressions of regret at having been compelled to act in a manner calculated to annoy and surprise his friends, especially as it was not possible for him fully to explain his course of action in public. But when he told them that only on the previous day it had come to his knowledge that Mr. Moss had absolutely bribed his clerk to leave his service, with the offer of a salary far beyond his deserts, on condition that he would be prepared to swear, if called upon, that in a business interview between his master and Mr. Wycherley he had distinctly heard the name of Rose Playfair mentioned, they could easily imagine in what a painful position, he, Mr. Buller, found himself placed.

"I assure you," he went on, warming with his subject, "I never closed an eye last night. There was no time for consultation with any of my supporters. What could I do? Let that fellow proceed with his infamous scheme, and clear myself at the expense of dragging this unhappy story forward again, and cruelly lacerating the feelings of that unfortunate family? No, my friends, such a line of action would be impossible to me. Perish all my dearest hopes in this world rather than that they should be fulfilled at such a cost! I saw clearly, after the first shock of indignant astonishment had passed, that there was one, and one course only, open to me, as a man of honour and, I hope, of Christian feeling; and that course I have endeavoured to carry out to the best of my ability. I have only further to explain to those friends whose cordial support has given them a right to claim such an

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[The following text is extremely faint and illegible due to blurring and low contrast. It appears to be a continuation of a narrative or dialogue.]

explanation, what are the facts in this ingenious intermixture of fact and falsehood—always promising that these explanations are given in strict confidence.

“The facts then are these:—In the course of last summer, Mr. Wycherley was apprised that the party who held the mortgages on his property required to realise. He mentioned the fact, I believe, to some friends on the day of the races, asking them if they could tell him of anyone who would be likely to take up these mortgages, he being, as you are all aware, more French than English, and not well up to English procedure in such cases. My name was mentioned to him, and on the race course he spoke to me on the subject, arranging then to call shortly at my office, to go more at length into the matter. Finding the investment a thoroughly sound one, though not, of course, one bearing very high interest, I, as a mere matter of business, agreed to take over the mortgages myself. There being some little further business to settle, and some difficulty in arranging a meeting, I ventured to suggest that Mr. Wycherley should dine at my house; and then, to my subsequent deep and lasting regret, asked Miss Playfair, whom I happened to meet on my way home, if she would come and bear Mrs. Buller company on that occasion. To my lady friends,” and he made a slight bow in the direction of Mrs. Tatnell and Miss Witham, “I must leave it to decide whether, considering that I had no idea of any acquaintance between the two, and that Miss Playfair was then engaged to be married to one of our most respected fellow-townsmen, I can be fairly

charged with any indiscretion in this matter. I confess that what I saw at the ball, the following week, surprised and startled me, and made me regret that I had been any party to an acquaintance. But to no one was the subsequent disaster a greater thunder-clap than to myself, though I little dreamed then how adroitly these circumstances would ere long be used against me. Now, my friends are in possession of the whole facts of the case. They must judge of my conduct as they choose."

"And I make bold to say, Mr. Buller," exclaimed Mr. Polson, starting up with vehement intention, and excruciating English, "as that judgment must be that your conduct, sir, is such as is an honour to any gentleman, and just to be expected. And I'm proud to call you a friend, sir, which I know everyone else here is the same, and clearly quite disinterested on my part. And I beg to propose your health, sir, and that next year we shall have the happiness to see you our representative in this parish, which I am sure you won't shrink from the unpleasant duty, probable enough then, of undoing a year of mischief, and no man fitter for such a task. And here's to your very good health, sir!"

This speech was received in a manner stamping it as an unanimous expression of the feelings of the company, so far as its intent was discoverable. And after Mr. Buller had returned thanks, with a becoming air of fervid, but slightly mournful gratitude, and expressed a wish that this very painful subject might now be dropped, conversation again became general. When the party broke up, and he was left alone, he glanced over the scattered fragments

of the feast, made a hasty calculation of the length of time the household could subsist on the remains, ran his eye over the empty bottles, and making a rapid estimate in his own mind of the outlay involved and the moral results, decided that it was as good an investment as he had ever made in his life. Over his cigar that evening he reviewed the events of the last few weeks, and their closing scenes that day, and was almost better satisfied at their unexpected turn than if he had been at that moment the successful candidate. Contemplation of personal merit is always a gratifying occupation, and could he not luxuriantly revel in the consciousness that, come what might, Octavius Buller knew how to manage his own interests?

The rector, Mr. Huddleston, and Mr. Daniels left the meeting together, as they had come. When they had got clear of the numerous groups dotted about the High Street, in earnest discussion, Mr. Daniels said,—

“Well, that is the queerest election of churchwardens it has ever been my lot to attend. With all due deference to the chair, I am by no means certain that the proceedings were strictly regular.”

“You are not more uncertain than the chair, then,” replied the rector, laughing. “I am strongly of opinion that the proper course would have been to adjourn the meeting, and appoint another day for the election. But no one will take exception to the proceedings, and it was better settled at once. A week’s delay would only have meant a vast increase of quarrelling and ill-will, and nothing gained. That man Buller is a clever fellow.”

“Uncommonly,” replied Mr. Daniels; “far too clever for Moss,” and then he paused. The question, “Do you believe there can possibly be any truth in the accusation?” was almost on his lips. But he remembered Mr. Huddleston’s presence in time to check it.

That same thought was in the rector’s mind too, and closely occupying his attention as he walked slowly up the avenue toward the Court, after parting from his two companions. The episode of the note, on the day of the races came strongly back to his remembrance, puzzling him as to whether it told for or against Octavius Buller, distinctly pointing, as it did, to some previous communication between the two. He could not but feel, however, that on the most favourable construction the bare facts had a suspicious appearance, though he rejected at once the current theory of Buller having taken a bribe to aid Mr. Wycherley’s designs. Shrewd observers of human nature study such phases of it as come under their notice as instinctively and almost as unconsciously as they breathe, thus laying up, without any definite intention, large stores of observation, which mould themselves into opinions by a process so gradual as to be almost, if not quite, imperceptible. Hence it often happens that, when the attention of any such psychologist is strongly directed towards the doings of some acquaintances whom he is not aware of having specially studied, he finds himself possessed of stronger opinions respecting the motives which are likely to actuate the object of his contemplation, than he could himself produce any logical cause for holding; and he probably relegates his slowly-formed opinion to the shadowy realms of in-

tuitive perceptions, by reason of having lost sight of the processes constantly going on in his own mind. So it was with Lionel Lawrence. He was wholly unconscious of ever having studied the nature of Mr. Octavius Buller, yet he found himself now intuitively convinced, as he said to himself, that he was not the man for such a petty piece of rascality as that. If there were any truth at all in the accusation made against him, there would be some deeper motive underlying his action.

This point in his reflections brought him to the drawing-room at the Court, where Kate was anxiously waiting to hear how the great struggle had ended. He briefly and graphically sketched the scene for her.

"I never heard of such a case," she exclaimed, with an assumption of grave interest, belied by her laughing eyes. "It is quite without precedent. Cheese and Bacon ought to be summarily dealt with. It is no fair race; he has simply rushed straight at poor Plans and Leases, and knocked him off his legs altogether."

"I am not sure that Plans and Leases has not gained a good deal more than he has lost by the result! It is not bad play to turn a defeat into an opportunity for figuring in the character of a maligned man, who will not make any attempt to clear his character for the sake of sparing pain and distress to others. But tell me seriously, my wee darling, what you think about it?"

"About what?"

"As to what truth there may be in these accusations against Buller? The most malicious of

slanderers may chance sometimes to hit the truth by accident."

"They may have got hold of some part of the truth, perhaps," she replied, more gravely, "but that is all. I don't know enough about this Mr. Buller to judge of what he may be capable in the way of rascality. I have only seen him once or twice, straddling along the High Street, in all the splendour of glossy broadcloth and sublime self-adoration. But I am very certain about Mr. Wycherley. His handsome face and figure and fascinating manner have, unfortunately, done too much for him in that line to let him dream of invoking any external aid in carrying out such a design, especially as money is a somewhat scarce article with him. If this Mr. Buller has mixed himself up in the matter, there must be some cause beyond what we know."

Lionel smiled. The woman's quick wit had gone straight to the weak point in the story, showing it to be, in the exact form it had assumed, in itself absurd. And he could only wonder it had not struck him in that light sooner. Neither had, however, thoughts to spare for long to any such subjects. They were to be married in less than a fortnight, and that is not a condition of things leaving much space for purely objective speculations of any sort.

The matter was, however, thrust upon Lionel Lawrence's attention again within a few days; and one fragment of trustworthy information added to his stock of knowledge. He had ridden over to Willesbury to transact various pieces of business, and was walking down the principal street when he met Mr. Waller, the senior partner in the firm of

Waller & Yardley, solicitors, with whom he had some acquaintance.

"I have just been speaking of you," Mr. Waller said, as they shook hands. "I met Smithson, and he was telling me of your doings on Easter Monday. I must say you elect churchwardens in an odd way in Monksford."

"It has been both a strange and unlucky business from first to last."

"So I heard. I don't think much of your churchwarden, I can tell you. He was over seeing Yardley a short time since about this very matter. But this is a strange story about that fellow Buller. Do you suppose he was really concerned with the elopement of poor Playfair's daughter?"

"Not in the manner suggested," replied Mr. Lawrence, burning his borrowed lights with much complacency, and with a feeling of manly satisfaction in the consciousness that he was a wiser man for the wits of the woman he worshipped. "Wycherley is one of the handsomest and most fascinating men of the day. He would never dream of seeking such aid in accomplishing his purposes. There have certainly been some business transactions between them. I suspect that is about all that anyone really knows."

"Yes, that is true enough. I can tell you how that stands. A client of ours held the Wycherley mortgages. The time for which they were bound to stand expired lately, and this man Buller undertook to take them over at one and a-half per cent. less than our client was receiving, and has got them all. I should think the treaty must have some secret

articles. Buller has not a character hereabout for special liberality, and he could easily have got a thoroughly safe investment for his money at the interest my client was receiving. One and a-half per cent. when you come to some thousands makes a difference."

"Buller never sacrificed five shillings per cent. without some self-interested motive," the rector replied. "But—" Then he paused.

"But what?"

"But I can't conceive where the motive can lie in this case, I was going to say. He may, however, hope to ingratiate himself with the gentry around. It might be a good stroke of business for him."

That abrupt pause in Lionel Lawrence's speech had, however, a cause he did not choose to divulge. Experience and observation had suddenly mingled, and the result was an unexpected flash of light upon a dark spot. His own recollections supplied instances of mortgagees foreclosing, and he judged Octavius Buller to be an ambitious as well as an unprincipled man. A suspicion of something very near the truth darted through his mind; and though he had little time to give to it then, he instinctively recognised in it a subject of probable personal interest to himself.

In Monksford itself all signs of the great turmoil disappeared with unusual rapidity. Although under the inspiriting influences of Mr. Buller's turtle soup and sparkling champagne, his supporters were capable of enthusiastic expressions of admiration, there still remained, in calmer moments, a certain residuum of mortification at the sudden and unexpected collapse of the struggle in which they had fought thus

gallantly; while their adversaries were smarting under the consciousness of having been adroitly foiled by a masterly retreat, which not only robbed their success of half its legitimate results, but secured to the enemy a considerable share of the prestige properly belonging to a triumph.

Under these circumstances both sides were quite ready to let the whole subject drop out of discussion as soon as possible, and fortune, in the form of the rector's rapidly approaching marriage, was strongly in their favour. An exciting event looming large in the immediate future is naturally a stronger weapon than an exciting event already diminishing in the receding past. It proved itself equal to turning even the trenchant blows of Mrs. Corbett.

"Well, Miss Witham," she said, swooping down upon her and Mrs. Tatnell the day following the election, with a smile of anticipated triumph, "I hope you like the goings on of your friend, Mr. Buller! A nice trick he has played you all. Letting you go on canvassing in this way, and then making fools of you all by turning tail at the last moment."

"Mr. Buller is not a friend of mine, Mrs. Corbett, as everyone knows. Our acquaintance is a very slight one. He has, however, explained his action in this matter, privately, in a way which must compel all those who intended to vote for him to feel that his conduct has been most honourable and creditable to him. But we have not time for any discussions on these matters; our thoughts are too much occupied with other things. I think, Mrs. Tatnell, we shall get the ribbon cheaper at Colston's than at Hammond's. They will take off a good deal for such

a large quantity. We are all agreed that every child in the school ought to have a favour; only a small one, of course. Still, it will use up a great deal of ribbon. Let us go at once to Colston's and see what they say. You will excuse us, Mrs. Corbett. Good morning."

Even mildly neutral Mrs. Daniels was found by the outspoken woman fully armed. "Oh, it was a stupid, unfortunate business altogether, but Mr. Daniels says ~~the~~ the best thing now is to let sleeping dogs lie. Have you called yet on the Dales? The new curate, and his wife, I hear they arrived last week. I hope he is a good preacher, for I understand the rector purposes being absent about six weeks."

"The wedding is to be quite a quiet one," put in Mrs. Collier; "at least so I understand. Almost private, in fact."

"Of necessity, I should think," said Mrs. Corbett, finding a vent for her repressed proclivities in sententious suppositions. "I do not suppose Mr. Lawrence would be very anxious to see any of his relations at his marriage, and I should think Miss Tollmache's friends would be little inclined to attend. I hear that poor Miss Bradley was packed off last week. I should have thought, after having taken such good care of her cousin's house for so long, she at least might have been asked to stay for the wedding."

"Just what she was asked to do," said Mrs. Collier, darting a peck at a companion vulture. "She told me herself Miss Tollmache had begged her to stay; asked her to come to the Court, but she wants to go to some friend who is ill. Miss Tollmache has quite made a conquest of her, at any rate. She says she

is the most noble, generous-hearted creature she ever came across."

"Oh, she is glamoured too, is she? Well, who knows, perhaps we may have a colony of the rector's relations coming to settle in Monksford yet. To eat of the crumbs, you know—that sort of thing."

Mrs. Collier pointedly turned away at this speech. It was generally understood that Mrs. Corbett was inclined to be a little profane sometimes, and must then be repressed. "How do your girls like Fanny's drawing-master?" she asked Mrs. Daniels.

"Oh, very much; and I hope he may be able to make an arrangement, after the holidays, to come here, instead of them being obliged to go to Willesbury, which will be a great convenience."

It was quite true that the marriage was to be a very quiet one. "All those arrangements are for you to settle, my wee pet," Lionel Lawrence had said when the matter was under discussion. "But if you really wish it should be very quiet, it is certainly what would please me best."

"I have been bridesmaid at nine brilliant marriages," she replied, gravely. "In three cases, I know the brides would have preferred different bridegrooms; in two, there was abundant reason to believe the bridegrooms were in like case. Two more were certainly cases of mutual toleration for advantageous reason; the others, I fancy, had a mild regard for each other. Yes, Lionel, let our marriage be as nearly private as possible!"

A silent gesture was the explanatory appendix of this speech, and thus the question was settled, to Mr. Tollmache's equal satisfaction. The man who,

when past fifty years of age, finds pleasure in marriage festivities, has probably not yet appeared on this earthly scene; and in the present case, there were special circumstances, apart from the inevitable "buts," which not even his strong liking for his intended son-in-law, and satisfactory assurance that he would have to dread no future personal annoyance from the marriage, could entirely smooth away from the polished surface of a patrician mind.

"If you wish it, my dear," he said, "I can only say I rejoice to hear it. A marriage is generally the greatest nuisance going. A house is not tolerable for a week before, or a week afterwards. Besides, if it had not been quite quiet, Clanraven and your aunt Gwendolyn must have been asked; and I would not like her to get footing in the house when you are gone."

"Be thankful then that Lewis is abroad," she replied, laughing. "Had he been in England, he would have certainly insisted on coming, and then no defences would have kept aunt Gwendolyn from bringing the girls to act as bridesmaids. Eight thousand a-year and a long minority, and I have sent him roaming over half Europe, when he might have been here to dance attendance on my bridesmaids! Aunt Gwendolyn will certainly poison me one of these days."

Not very long after that discussion, Mr. Tollmache came in from riding, one afternoon, with a disturbed, anxious face. "Kate," he said, abruptly entering the drawing-room, "I am going to leave here the day after your marriage. I shall take a run up the Mediterranean, I think. At any rate I shall be

away until after you return. Please arrange with Mrs. Bell accordingly."

"My dear father," exclaimed Kate, in much amazement, "this is very sudden."

He did not reply for a moment. Then he said, "I met Mostyn to-day. He told me that Assheton woman has written to offer Mrs. Mostyn a visit. She comes next week. Of course, poor Mrs. Mostyn is only too thankful to have her. But I ask you, Kate, of what must a woman be capable, who, as a still handsome widow, can go and stay in that house? Hang it, I would not stay without some protection within ten leagues of the place!"

"Given the marriage," Lady Clanraven wrote to Lady Jarvis, "I think they are doing the most sensible thing they can. It is an enormous relief to me. I felt we must be present, had Horace asked it, but it would have been most painful. Now, my dear, do me a favour. Go and call on Constance. She is going directly to Ripley Lodge. Of course, I know it is a serious step, but she loves poor Mrs. Mostyn so dearly. They have been friends from childhood. She will not forsake her, and how can I urge it? Constance is such a true-hearted, unselfish creature. And there is a quiet innate dignity about her which will carry her safely through much which another woman could hardly venture to face. But do call."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," Lady Jarvis said indignantly to Ada. "I think it is disgraceful. Lady Assheton has no business to place herself in such a position, and I shall tell Lady Clanraven what I think. Have you written out the cards for

dinner on the 24th, my love? Don't forget Mr. Tollmache. It will be most dreary for him at the Court, all alone. I think we must try and get him to come to us for a few days."

"Shall you call on the Lawrences, mother, when they come back?"

"Certainly. A clergyman is always received everywhere, and Mr. Lawrence is a very agreeable man. If his wife does not indulge in any very violent eccentricities, I quite hope for some pleasant social intercourse. Though I must say, Mr. Tollmache's wish that they should live with him at the Court seems to me most extraordinary. I suppose he must have a vein of eccentricity in him also."

Of this fact Lady Jarvis probably became firmly convinced when she heard that Wycherley Court was shut up, and Mr. Tollmache roaming about the distant shores of the Mediterranean. She relented, however, in the matter of Lady Assheton.

"I shall not take you girls with me," she said, "but I think, on second thoughts, I will call. I cannot approve the step she has taken; still one must not be too severe; and really I do sincerely feel for poor Mrs. Mostyn."





CHAPTER XXXIV.

MONKSFORD ON WORLDLINESS.

THE very quiet wedding must be understood only in the sense of an absence of a bevy of bridesmaids, and a crowd of gorgeously clad Olympians, with a corresponding confusion of carriages, bouquets, and livery servants. In all other respects the day was one to be long remembered in Monksford. Mr. Tollmache having signed the marriage settlements, had washed his hands of all further active interference in the arrangements, so the rector and his bride-elect proceeded to celebrate the event after their own fashion, and Monksford was of opinion that the wedding must have cost an enormous sum. The boys of the Grammar School rejoiced in a whole holiday and a gigantic wedding cake. The old pensioners of the Wycherley Almshouses and the Bennet Hospital beheld and swallowed beef, pudding, and ale to an extent not often vouchsafed to their admiring eyes and craving stomachs. The children of the National and Sunday Schools, duly adorned with wedding favours, marshalled in the church, and

strewed flowers before the bride, and were then regaled in Wycherley Park with good things, such as their wildest dreams had never pictured. In fine, it was a day of rejoicing to the poor of all ages, and when the carriage which bore away the bride and bridegroom drove rapidly through the town, although rice and white slippers were scarce, it was followed by blessings none the less sincere because they were prompted by a sense of well-fed comfort not often enjoyed by their utterers.

"Now confess," said Mrs. Campbell to young Corbett, who was escorting her home after the ceremony was over, "that you never saw any one so handsome as the bride?"

"I shall do no such thing. You know quite well she *could* only stand second with me; and she is far from doing that. Of course, she is a fine specimen of a certain style, but it is not a style which I admire."

"Well, I must admit I was disappointed myself this morning. I thought she would have looked better than she did. She is not slight enough for white satin; and I must say I think her dress was quite ridiculous. If everything was to be so very quiet, such satin and lace were quite out of place. A plain silk and tulle veil would have looked far more in keeping. But, oh, did you notice her cross and earrings? What diamonds! I wonder where she got them?"

"Not from Lawrence, you may be sure," responded her companion, with the well-satisfied laugh of a man who felt that he himself was the fortunate possessor of ample means to give his bride diamonds,

though perhaps not quite such as the bride of that morning had worn. "I wonder what he has given her? Precious little beyond her wedding ring, I should think; and had to borrow money to buy that, probably."

"How can you talk such nonsense? But, seriously, I cannot, I confess, understand how any man with no fortune can bring himself to marry an heiress. It seems to me a most humiliating position."

"Oh, you ladies spoil those parsons until they think it is an honour for anyone to marry them. But I am glad you think so. You at least will not be likely to fall a prey to a fortune hunter."

He accompanied the words with a sentimental look. The poor young man found love-making very hard work; the proper things to say would never come readily to him. If they came at all, it was toiling painfully in the rear of circumstances. He felt that could he only have always thought at the right moment of the charming little speeches which occurred to him half-an-hour too late, he might have been the most successful lady killer in the county. He could only fall back on the consoling reflection that his father's only son could well afford not to be very ready with his tongue.

There was a mighty assemblage of varying, and in some cases of conflicting, opinion in Mrs. Collier's drawing-room that afternoon.

"For my part," she said herself, "I must say I think the whole thing rather absurd. In my opinion a wedding should be an occasion for a joyful meeting of friends and relations, not an opportunity for a display of so-called charitable expenditure."

"Oh, I can assure you," replied Miss Witham, with all the delightful consciousness of superior knowledge, "that sort of thing is quite the custom now among the upper classes. When my cousin the Admiral's eldest daughter was married, there were just the same sort of festivities, only, of course, they were accompanied by a marriage in proper style—twelve bridesmaids, and a splendid party from all parts of the county. The really ridiculous part of this marriage is that the bride should have been dressed as she was, with nothing like a wedding party."

"You are all missing the right view of the case," said Mrs. Corbett; "it is the cleverest management I have ever seen. How could there be a wedding party? I don't suppose the bride's friends would have come if they had been asked; and how could they be asked to meet the relations on the other side? You may depend they were in a cleft stick, and most cleverly they have got out of the difficulty. A fine blaze there'll be in the county papers about goodness to the poor, and all that sort of thing, and preferring to feast the poor and suffering, to inviting your rich friends and neighbours. It'll take in the world in general, no doubt; but I'm not so easily hoodwinked. If ever a man showed downright self-seeking worldliness, Mr. Lawrence has done it in marrying Miss Tollmache. And when a clergyman goes that length, in my opinion, he'd better carry it through openly and honestly, and not try and cover it with a great fuss about charity, and all that sort of thing. No man can serve two masters, you know."

"Neither ought we to judge one another," said Mrs. Daniells, roused into some spirit. "If Mr. Lawrence and Miss Tollmache were really attached to each other, I think it would have been a very hard case that they should have been prevented marrying merely because she happened to be an heiress."

"Oh, yes, indeed, my dear, you go too far," chimed in Mrs. Collier. "I can't deny that I think Mr. Lawrence might have made a much more suitable marriage; but he has always been very good to the poor, and so has Miss Tollmache. I don't think we ought to throw any doubts upon their motives in doing so much for them, though, of course, you are quite right about the awkwardness of arranging a wedding party."

"Well, everyone can think as he likes," retorted Mrs. Corbett. "I, for one, shall not change my opinion until I see good reason to do so. And I can only say that for my part the oftener Mr. Dale preaches in future the better pleased I shall be."

"Oh, how can you say so?" exclaimed Miss Witham. "I have no doubt he is an excellent man, but he is certainly no preacher."

"I quite differ from you, Miss Witham," put in Mrs. Tatnell. "I agree with Mrs. Corbett. I hope he'll preach very often. Good, plain gospel sermons I call them, which we ought all to be the better for hearing. No great display of human learning, perhaps, but, to my thinking, they're none the worse for that. And, at any rate, you're always quite sure they're not aimed at anyone in particular; and I've often felt an uncomfortable feeling, and I'm

sure others have done the same, that Mr. Lawrence was preaching at some particular person."

While Monksford was thus busy with every detail of the marriage, Lionel Lawrence and his bride had vanished into the mysterious regions of the honeymoon, which, if it be not a bourne from whence no traveller returns, is certainly a land of which no visitor has as yet left records, either of warning or guidance, for those who may come after. An unimportant omission; for is it not an enchanted land, whose every feature of form and colouring takes shape and hue according to the characteristics of its visitors? Its memories, it is to be feared, are rarely of unalloyed brightness. Even if it be not the burial ground of mild preference, and the birth-place of absolute repulsion, it is there, often enough, that bright illusions perish, and grave anxieties for the future take their first shadowy rise. And they are fortunate who carry into it good sense enough to bring back from its experiences profitable hints for future guidance.

For Lionel Lawrence and Kate it had no such experiences. Prematrimonial acquaintance leaves in general much space for subsequent exploration, and abundant opportunity for startling effects, pleasant or otherwise, but not for them. That subtle attraction, whose irresistible power is felt far more readily than its nature may be analysed, and which had drawn them to each other, sweeping away with its mighty unseen force all the impediments which social barriers had piled up between them, left them nothing to learn of each other in kind, only in degree. That enchanted region, was, however, the burial

place of some anxieties which Lionel had never avowed, but which had sometimes thrown a slight shadow over the brightness of his prospects. No man knew better than he that social marks, even if not stamped by the hand of nature, are none the less inevitable. Kate Tollmache, born and reared amidst all the surroundings of wealth and rank, how free and independent soever she might be herself of all such accidental associations, was not, and never would be, exactly what she would have been had she been reared amidst the scenes in which his own early life had been passed, or in such as those with which she must in future be, to a certain extent, associated. Did she thoroughly know what she was doing? Of the slightest jar in their personal relations to each other he had never a shadow of dread. But did she fully understand and rightly estimate all not distinctly personal which her choice involved? These thoughts had sometimes troubled him, especially with reference to the claims which the Monksford world would certainly consider itself entitled to make upon the wife of its rector; for, with the keen instinct of natural refinement, he divined that the "excellent society" of which that self-satisfied town loudly boasted, would be a far severer trial to patrician tendencies, than the most intimate association with the honest unassuming simplicity with which genuine self-respect had surrounded his own humble early life.

Day by day as he watched her in her new character those fears dwindled away. The unconscious dignity of demeanour, which was blended with her fearless independence, so effectually kept in check

any unwarrantable assumptions to which the latter quality might have given rise: and her perceptions were so keen, and her powers of expression so forcible, that he very soon began to regard her as more competent to cope with Monksford in its most rampant objectionability than he was himself, and to anticipate, with some amusement, some passages of arms which he foresaw would be inevitable before the just relations of things were finally and satisfactorily settled. At last he gave the strongest proof possible that his fears were scattered to the four winds. He told her of them.

She was sitting on his knee one evening, listening with no small amusement to his recital of some clerical experiences of his life in Monksford, and commenting thereon with a keen perception of their ludicrous side, which augured well for her chances of grappling successfully with future requirements.

"You don't know what a relief it is to me," he said at last, "to find you able to treat all these things in such a spirit."

"Why so, Lionel?"

He did not immediately reply. He paused before answering to perpetrate an outrageous piece of romance—outrageous in consideration of his six-and-thirty years of life. Her left arm was wreathed lightly round his neck, and he stopped to draw her hand closer, her "wee wicked hand," as he was wont to term it, and imprint a long fervent kiss on the massive wedding ring upon it. He often did it. Why? Heaven knows! and such men as do find pleasure in kissing their wives wedding rings, whose name most likely is not legion; but no one else,

rather hard case. He was deluded into the idea that there was a good opening in Monksford for another practitioner, and now that he has found out his mistake he cannot afford to go away. He was very kind to the Playfairs about Rome. But what made you ask?"

"I have seen him once or twice in the town, and thought he had a good, honest, kind face. Besides, I thought he acted so kindly and so sensibly about poor little Rome, and that note at the races."

Mrs. Lawrence's reply was the truth, but not the whole truth. There were ideas in her mind beyond what she avowed to her husband. The perfect confidence between husband and wife which is one of the regulation receipts for matrimonial happiness is perhaps most fully exemplified when neither has the least fear of concealing anything from the other, if he or she deems it advisable. "If my husband (or my wife) has concealed anything from me, he (or she) has some good reason for doing so." That is the sort of speech which manifests matrimonial confidence founded on a rock.

The days which sped so rapidly for the wedded lovers, rolled along somewhat tediously in Monksford. A quiet hard-working curate, with a common-place ~~venerable~~ wife, though invested with all the charm of activity, was but a poor substitute for the excitement which had been nearly perennial since the ~~Parliament~~ had come to live at Wycherley Court. Some of the superfluous vigilance expended itself on Mrs. Campbell, whom Miss Witham soon found it her Christian duty to inform of the very unpleasant ~~rumors~~ which were being made about her and Ned

Corbett, whose character was really such as made it damaging to any young woman to appear to be intimate with him.

“I think it only right to tell you what is being said, for your own guidance. People are so ill-natured, it is necessary to be very cautious. And everyone thinks he is only playing with you. It is perfectly well known that if he ever cared for any girl it was Rose Playfair. He certainly was refused by her, and you are a good deal like her, you know.”

This last blistering application of friendly interest clenched the whole matter, by producing a scene of mingled tears, reproaches, protestations, and entreaties, the next time the delinquent called, which brought matters to a head; and just when Monksford was beginning to revive a little, in the prospect of the approaching return of the bride and bridegroom, it was further stimulated into animation by the news that Mr. Edward Corbett had been accepted by Mrs. Campbell, and that they were to be married in the autumn.

“And a good thing too for every girl in Monksford,” Mrs. Tatnell said, when she heard it; “though how she can ever bring herself to marry him is more than I can understand.”

Lady Assheton, it is needless to say, did not linger long at Ripley Lodge; but in saying good-bye, she sped a little shaft at Lady Jarvis. “Good-bye, dear. I am so charmed to have seen a little of you, and the dear girls again. I fear this will prove rather a dull summer for you. Nothing to be hoped from WYVERN. The Duke is dreadfully hard up, I hear, after

the expenses of entertaining Royalty last year. They are going abroad for the summer: and nothing to expect at Wycherley. Gwendolyn tells me Lord Clanraven has heard from his brother that he intends to spend the whole summer in the Mediterranean, and not return home until November at least. Terrified at the idea of the love-making, I suppose."

"Father will not come home until November, Lionel," Kate said, looking up from an open letter. "He says he will not face the mob of hungry widows and spinsters until the excitement about him has had a little time to cool down."





CHAPTER XXXV.

WHO WAS TO BLAME?

“FROM Lewis!” Kate exclaimed one morning, about a week before the date fixed for their return home, selecting and hastily opening a letter with foreign post marks, which was lying among several others on the breakfast table. “O Lionel,” she exclaimed, with flushed eagerness, as she rapidly skimmed through it, “he has come up with them at last, at Munich!”

“Has he telegraphed to Playfair?”

“Yes—no—wait a moment—what is this? Oh, how clever of him to plan that! Dear boy—what a good fellow he is,—I will give you the letter, in a moment, Lionel—”

She continued her reading through these disjointed sentences, and then handed the letter to her husband.

“I have at last come up with them,” Lewis Gwynne wrote, “and am actually in a house in the same street! I was certainly born for a detective. I have been making such admirable discoveries,

partly by the aid of accident, I must admit. I need not write useless details; the upshot of the matter is this. Just as I was on the point of telegraphing to Doctor Playfair to come at once, I chanced to find out that Wycherley is in treaty with some English people to take a small house from them, in a retired part of the town, for six months. You may depend the rascal meditates giving her the slip! On this I paused. He wants to have the house at once. If they are going into it directly it will be better for her father not to come until they are established there. The whole business will be managed much more quietly in that way, than amidst all the publicity of an hotel. Poor child! I have been dodging them about. He treats her abominably, with such insolent indifference, and she looks sadly worn, unhappy, and frightened; but it is a sweet innocent face, through it all. He leaves her sometimes for whole days alone in the hotel, and altogether conducts himself like such an unmitigated brute, that I should not think there would be any difficulty in persuading her to leave him, when once she is assured her friends are ready to welcome her back. I think you had better write, and warn her father to be prepared for a telegram at any moment."

The warning was despatched at once, worded with all due caution, to the effect that Mr. Gwynne had lighted upon some traces which he had every hope would lead to a satisfactory result, therefore Doctor Playfair must hold himself prepared. It was the first note of really well-grounded hope which had been sounded in the ears of the sorrow-

ing parents; but it struck them almost with the shock of some fresh disaster, substituting for the dull, cheerless routine into which they had settled down all the mingled dread, watching, and anxiety of the first days of their great grief, and suggesting afresh that terribly harassing question, What then? If their child was given back to them, what was to follow? A question comparatively easy of solution where money is plentiful, but sorely hard to answer with an income narrowed almost to bare necessaries of life.

“It’s no use trying to be blind to the fact, Charles,” said poor Mrs. Playfair. “Rose being here at home would be very bad for her sisters’ chances; and if they don’t marry, I’m sure I don’t know what is to become of them. Yet we can never afford to place her anywhere.”

“Let that rest, my dear,” her husband answered, trying to cheer her, in spite of his own dreary reflections on the same subject. “Let us get her back first, as Mrs. Lawrence said to you, and then it will be time enough to think for the future.”

“It’s very well for her to say that,” replied Mrs. Playfair fretfully. “They say she has at least four thousand a-year of her own, beside what she’ll get from her father. That makes many things look easy which seem very hard when you scarce know where to find food and clothing for a large family.”

“Come, come, cheer up, my love! Think of the joy of seeing our darling Rose safe again! And be sure such kind friends as the rector and Mrs. Lawrence have shown themselves won’t fail us in the future.”

On the day fixed for the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence (minute research had elicited the fact that she was not "the honourable," and she was felt by many to be, consequently, a much more approachable person) at Wycherley Court, there seemed to be almost as much urgent business to be transacted in the High Street as on the day of Victor Wycherley's first visit, or of the Tollmaches' arrival.

"Dear, dear!" said Mrs. Moss to her daughter, watching anxiously from the window for the reappearance of the carriage, which had passed out on its way to the station some time before, "who'd ever think it wasn't more than eighteen months since we were watching for Mr. and Miss Tollmache to arrive? What a many things have happened since then!"

"And when Mr. Wycherley came, mamma, do you remember how Rose Playfair was walking about the street with Charlie, all dressed up so?"

"Yes, to be sure; and I've often thought she did something to attract him then. I was always sure she was a bold girl at heart, for all she looked so demure. But Buller had a hand in it afterwards, that's certain, for all he contrived to slip out of it at the election. Nasty, mean, sneaking fellow! and most uncomfortable it is for your papa, I'm sure, never feeling as if he'd been properly elected."

"Why, mamma, it's full two years since the day Mr. Wycherley came," said her daughter, who was not accustomed to pay much heed to her mother's ramblings.

"Two years! To be sure, so it is, and this carpet was just new them. I must say it has worn well, Eliza. Dyson & Dyer's things are good, if they do

come expensive; no one can doubt that. And I am sure this carpet, cleaned up a bit, will look sweetly pretty, with a nice chintz for curtains and covers in that little morning room at the villa; and a morning room is what every lady should have, to my mind. I can't a-bear to see a drawing-room all of a litter; and there's nothing more vulgar than to be scrambling things out of the way when visitors are announced. I think your papa 'll take the villa from midsummer, and then I really shall be able to feel I can take my proper place in the town."

"Mamma, there go Mrs. Campbell and Ned Corbett. Just look how her hair is dressed up!"

"Well, I never! She has taken off her weeds, however, that's one good thing. A widow to go on wearing her weeds into the second year, when everyone knew she married an old man just for his money, and every inch of her got up for effect, too, I call it downright hypocrisy. Not but what the widow's cap suited her, I must allow. They say that Ned Corbett—"

"There they come!" exclaimed the daughter, and both heads were eagerly thrust forward. "Keep behind the curtain, Eliza; it's very vulgar to be seen staring out of windows," remonstrated Mrs. Moss.

"Did you see her, mamma? I did, quite plain. She has got on a lovely travelling dress—grey and black—and a hat she used to wear before she was married. One with black velvet and a feather."

"Well, I must say, I think, that's bad taste. In my opinion, a married lady, and a clergyman's wife too, and not so very young, should wear a bonnet.

But she is dressy, I've always thought that, and well for him she has plenty of money. Mrs. Parker told me she'd been helping in the Court laundry, when the laundry maid was ill, and that all her things were that fine they must cost a mint of money; and sometimes near on three dozen of pocket-handkerchiefs in the wash for one week. More than four a-day. You might think she used them for dusters!"

About nine o'clock that same evening, when Mr. Moss was dozing over the paper, enjoying in slippered ease well-earned repose from the fatigue of business hours, a stentorian shout of "Gate!" drew Miss Moss once more to the window, to peer into the not too well lighted street.

"It's their luggage, mamma," she said. "There's a fly from the station with luggage."

"Too much love-making. Lost it on the road, I suppose," suggested Mr. Moss.

"Likely enough. I did think it was rather a piece of affectation her going off in that way without any maid. A fine mess, I'll be bound, all her dresses are in."

The rector and his wife were drinking their coffee in the drawing-room when the fly in question drove up to the hall door. They did not expect any luggage, so looked at one another in some surprise at the sound of wheels; and Monk, stretched at his length on the hearthrug, looked inquiringly at both of them.

"Who can it be?" queried Kate.

"Your father, perhaps. Got a telegram from some watchful friend. 'Lady Assheton just started for a

tour in the Mediterranean,' and set off at once to seek his natural protectors!"

There was a little confusion in the hall for a moment, and then silence.

"It must be some one, for some of the servants, mistaken the entrance in the dark," Kate was just saying, when the door opened.

"A gentleman in the library wishes to speak to you, ma'am."

"Who is it?"

"He—he—didn't give any name, ma'am. He is in the library."

"Kate!" said her husband, in a low voice.

She turned, and they looked at one another for a moment. Then, hastily rising, she crossed the room to a door which gave entrance from it to the library. In another moment Rose Playfair was clasped in her arms, sobbing hysterically.

"Give her something to eat, and get her to bed," Lewis whispered in his cousin's ear. "We have travelled day and night. She is utterly worn out."

"Go to my husband, in the drawing-room. He will take care of you," she answered in the same tone. And Lewis Gwynne judiciously vanished.

"Hush, hush, my dear child, not a word," Kate said gently, but authoritatively, as the poor girl strove to falter out some incoherent expressions. "Come away with me."

She half-led, half-carried her up stairs to her own dressing-room, and summoned her maid, a kind-hearted woman, who threw herself heartily into the business. The girl was almost forced to swallow some food, and then carried off to bed, still without

being allowed to say one unnecessary word. But when Mrs. Lawrence bent down to kiss the poor wan face, almost as white as the pillow on which it rested, Rose threw her arms round her neck.

"Indeed, indeed, he did promise to marry me the instant we reached London! Oh say you forgive me!"

"Dear, I have nothing to forgive. I can only thank God we have you safe again. No more a word more, you must rest and sleep now. Tomorrow you shall tell me."

She negatived all further discussion by resolutely leaving the room as she spoke confident in the beneficial results in the direction of sleep of extreme bodily fatigue. She found her young cousin doing ample justice to a superbly improved supper.

"Lewis, you are the dearest, best boy in the world!" she said, bestowing a weary kiss upon him.

"I thought when things fell out as strangely it was the best thing I could do. But in fact, was an escape I have had! Lawrence tells me you only reached home a few hours since. I thought you would have been here a week ago. Fancy if I had arrived to find the house shut up and myself saddled with an unprospered young woman for an indefinite period! I should not have known what on earth to do with her."

"All's well that ends well" she answered smiling with an air of resignation quite unnecessary under the circumstances, with the prospect of what is currently termed "stability of union." But Mrs. Lawrence possessed a well known quality of hesitancy.

and was perfectly aware that between a healthy sport-loving young Englishman of one-and-twenty years of age, and any display of melodramatic sentiment, there is a great gulf fixed, any attempt to bridge over which can only result in a grand exhibition of the bathos. Lewis Gwynne had saved the girl, but he would have made a sorry figure at hysterical rhapsodies over a heartless seduction and a blighted life.

“I must have taken you tremendously by surprise,” he went on, “but I had no time to write. It fell out in this way. I was keeping a pretty close watch on that sweet pup Wycherley, intending to telegraph the moment they went into the house he had taken, and picking up much information to boot. There was a good deal of talking about them in the hotel. They all thought there that he had married her, and that she was beneath him in position. There was a great feeling of sympathy for her; she was so gentle and quiet, and seemed so unhappy, and everyone saw how abominably he treated her. There was a little bit of a shrubbery beside the house, and the windows of their sitting-room, which was on the ground floor, opened upon it. I used to take the liberty of smoking a good many cigars among those shrubs, and more than once I had heard him speaking to her in a most brutal tone, and could tell by her voice she was crying. At last, one day, I heard a great row going on, the windows were open, and now and then I could catch a word, though not enough to make out what was up. He was evidently insisting on something, in the coarsest way, and she remonstrating and entreating.

"This went on for some time: then I suppose they must have moved nearer to the window for suddenly I heard her voice distinctly say, 'Oh Victor, let me go with you! I won't be a burden to you; but oh, don't leave me here all alone! I've done with your nonsense, you silly fool, be removed in the most brutal way. Do you think I'm going to be perpetually harassed with you like a dog tied round my neck? I tell you I shall only be away three days. You can stay here quite well if no one will interfere with you. But you never left me as before,' she sobbed; 'oh, please don't do so now.' 'More fool I for not having sooner taught you better,' he replied. 'This'll be beginning for you. When I come back we shall go to the house I've taken, and then you'll have to stay by yourself for two or three months, while I go to England on some business. Now dry your eyes and don't make a fool of yourself. You've got money enough for all you'll want, till I come back. And one thing I can tell you, if you want to keep a hold on a fellow, it isn't done by a pale, diabolical looking face, and red eyelids. You'd best remember that, I can tell you. Good-bye.'

"I heard him go out of the room, and then such a long half-moan, half-sob from her. I'm not sentimental, Kate, but the sound brought up a great lump in my throat, I can tell you. Hardly knowing what I intended, I whisked round to the front of the house. There was my gentleman, just lighting a cigar on the door step, while the porter was putting a small portmanteau into a fly. I heard him say to a waiter as I passed into the house, 'Take

Mrs. Dawson her chocolate,' and then he drove away. I stood studying the tariff in the hall for a moment, considering whether I would not make some attempt to see the poor girl, when the waiter came through with the chocolate. There was a short passage led to the door of the sitting-room, and just as he was entering it the head waiter called him for something. He put down the chocolate on a small table, and vanished. An idea instantly flashed through my mind. I took up the tray and walked boldly with it into the room. She was standing at the window, and could see in a glass close to her who came into the room. She saw the tray, and told me to put it down, without turning round. I put the tray on the table, and then walking close up to her, said gently—

“‘Miss Playfair!’

“I thought I was in a mess then. She turned round with a start, and a faint scream, and was as white as a sheet. I didn't know whether she was going to faint, or rush out of the room; and I can tell you I wished myself anywhere else.

“‘Don't be frightened,' I said gently. ‘I come from friends, and am only anxious to help and save you.’

“‘Who are you?’ she gasped at length, clutching the back of a chair for support.

“‘My name is Gwynne,' I said ‘and my cousin, Kate Tollmache, bade me follow you, and not come back until I had found and rescued you from the rascal who has so infamously deceived you.’

“She did not speak, only stood staring at me with a piteous, helpless sort of look in her eyes. But I

could see she was taking in what I said, so I thought I had better go on. 'I have been tracking you ever since you left England,' I said, 'from place to place, but have only lately succeeded in coming up with you. I am just in time. You must know, now, the true character of the man who has misled you. He will not marry you, and he means to desert you.'

"'Oh, he could not be so cruel,' she gasped.

"'Poor child! I felt a regular butcher; but it was no kindness to spare her.

"'He can, and will though,' I said. He has done the same thing before now. He will never marry, except for money. He means to establish you in a small house he has taken for six months, and then go away, on the pretence of business in England. He will never come back.'

"She fainted dead off then. O Kate! I was in such a ghastly funk! I made sure some one would come in, and then, as sure as fate, I should get handed over to the police. But I got her on to a sofa, and nearly choked her, I believe, with some wine which was on the table; but at any rate it brought her to. And then I talked on to her, and told her how you were longing to have her back, and that I would not let her go again, even if I was obliged to have her arrested, until her father arrived. Poor child, I believe she was only loath to come with me because she still clung to the hope that the villain would marry her yet. But at last she yielded, so I clenched the matter by starting that very night; and here we are, and I have only one thing to regret—that I hadn't a chance to horse-whip that brute Wycherley before I started. How-

ever, he'll have to pay for that house for six months, for nothing, that's one comfort. And now I am going to bed. I am dead tired myself."

"Well, Kate, what is to be the next step?" her husband asked, when they were left alone.

"It is night," she answered. "We can't see to pick our steps in the dark. We must wait for daylight."

"Shall I not go at once to the Playfairs?"

"Oh no, not to-night. She looks terribly ghastly. I would like to keep her quite quiet for to-morrow; and then, by the next day, she will perhaps look a trifle better, poor child! Four-and-twenty hours will not matter."

"And then we are face to face with the question—What is to be done with her? It is a difficult one, Kate."

"I know it is; but there is no need to hurry. As father does not mean to come home until November, we have plenty of time to consider. I should like her to stay quietly here for a while, until we have time to see what sort of state she is in, and to consider what it will be best to do for her." And with that she relapsed into silent meditation, her husband quietly watching her, quite certain that she had already some design in her head for the girl, and wondering somewhat as to its nature.

Poor Rose was up and dressed when Kate went to her the next morning; and in the full light of day Mrs. Lawrence was able to estimate better than on the previous night what changes the last six months had wrought in her. Heavy sleep, produced by extreme physical fatigue, had done something to-

wards her restoration, by removing, to some extent, the haggard, pinched expression her face had worn when she arrived; but still the change in her bore a terrible witness to the suffering her own rash act had brought upon her. No beauty could well outlast the ordeal through which she had passed, least of all that fair, fragile bloom which had been her chief attraction. She had wasted sadly, and was very pale; her cheek had lost its lovely curve, and her very lips seemed to have become thin and colourless, while her eyelids had grown heavy with constant weeping, and her blue eyes dull and rayless. A vision of her as she had appeared at the ball rose before Mrs. Lawrence's eyes, and sent a sharp pang through her, as she took her in her arms and gently kissed her.

The poor girl's tears broke forth at once. "Oh, how good you are to me!" she sobbed. "I don't deserve it. Oh, if I had only heeded your warnings!"

"Dear child, with your bitterly-gained experience, you blame yourself more on that score than you deserve. We are all alike when we are young and inexperienced, and feel quite sure we are perfectly safe, until we learn the contrary, all too dearly."

The words came with some little hesitation, such as would have implied to an uninitiated bystander that Mrs. Lawrence was a little uncertain how to deal with her protégée. The actual hindrance, however, was the difficulty, to her, of saying on any subject what, though absolutely true, was not the truth which was uppermost in her own thoughts. But she could not say to the girl,—“Those who

inculcated on you from infancy lessons of vanity and frivolity, and left you, young and ignorant, exposed to the very dangers which their training had rendered most perilous to you, are those on whom the responsibility of the ultimate disaster rests." She could not say that to a child of her own parents, even could she have said it to anyone of parents on whom such a terrible retribution had fallen.

"But I don't think it was quite that," Rose replied, "though, indeed, I did not at first mean to do wrong. I should like to tell you all about it, if you don't mind. I feel quite puzzled and confused sometimes."

"Tell me whatever you like, my dear."

"Of course, I know," she went on, "that I have behaved very badly to poor George. But Mrs. Lawrence, I don't think now that I ever really loved him! Surely, if I had, that would have kept me safe. At least, I know, if—Vic—if Mr. Wycherley had proved to be all I believed him, nothing would have drawn me away from him. But you know we were very poor, and mamma was always saying that if we did not marry well she did not know what was to become of us, for that papa would never be able to leave us any money. And then she used to talk about the Mosses, and the Robertses, and say she was sure it was fortunate their fathers would have something to leave them, for such plain girls would never have a chance of marrying well. And though I daresay she didn't think of it, it gave me quite the idea, from a child, that I was to trust to being pretty to give me a chance of marrying well. Then when George proposed to me, I liked him well

enough, and I knew he would be rich, and that I should be able to have handsome clothes, and a carriage, and everything nice, and that all the other girls in the town would envy me. Mamma used to laugh about how hard they had all been trying for him. At first, when we were engaged, I was very happy. I had such beautiful presents, and was made so much of. Then when first I met Mr. Wycherley, and found out he admired me, I really meant no harm. I was very proud of being admired by him, and I thought it would be a grand thing, when I was married, to let him worship me, without ever daring to say a word which I ought not to hear. At the ball he told me he knew I was going to be married, and he asked me to go and meet him on Sunday afternoon in Cather-ton Wood, to say good-bye. I did not promise, and I did not then mean to go. But oh, Mrs. Lawrence, poor mamma's head was quite turned about the prince, and all that you know, and she began to talk as if it were quite a pity I had accepted George, and might do better. Then I began to think I would just see Mr. Wycherley before he went away, so I went to Catherton Wood, and there he told me he adored me, and went on in such a wild way, and said he could not go away, he should stay in the neighbourhood on the chance of seeing me sometimes. I was pleased, and yet I was frightened. Then George wanted we should be married at once, and mamma would not hear of it, and she talked in such a way I could see well enough she had got the idea I might marry one of the county gentlemen in time. Then Mr. Wycherley kept urging me to come and meet him, and threatening to

shoot himself if I did not let him see me sometimes ; and George was unhappy, and I knew Mr. and Mrs. Huddleston were offended, though they were always kind to me, and I thought they would be glad if the marriage was broken off. Still I didn't want to do wrong, and I felt very unhappy. Then Mr. Wycherley began to urge me to run away with him, and I began to feel that I loved him too much ever to marry George, and I really did begin to think it would be the best thing to do. I never dreamed of his deceiving me ; and I knew, in her secret heart, mamma would be delighted to see me married to him, even if I did elope ; and I thought people would blame her and papa if they encouraged me to break off my marriage with George, in order to marry him, and that by eloping I should save any chance of that. Mr. Wycherley promised me everything I wished. I thought he must love me very much to be so ready to do everything I wanted. I never dreamed how easy it was for him to promise everything. He said I should have a charming house in Paris, and lots of society, and that I should be so admired, he would be quite jealous ; and that I should go to all the grand balls, and that I should have Alice with me, and soon find a splendid marriage for her. He said she was just the girl some great friend of his who was very rich would fall madly in love with, and that then we could easily settle Lucy and Edith well, as they grew up. Oh, you cannot think what pictures he drew ; until at last I really thought it was quite the best thing to do, only my conscience was sore about poor George ; but I felt I could never marry him, and so the

sooner it was all over the better. And so at last it was settled, and we went off. I felt unhappy about going when it came to the point, but I consoled myself with thinking that if papa and mamma were vexed, they would be quite reconciled when they saw how I should be able to establish all my sisters, and perhaps help my brothers on—and then—oh, then slowly, slowly, came the dreadful waking from my dream! He made some plausible excuse for our not being married in London, which satisfied me for the moment, and I trusted him so entirely, I thought it would not matter for a week or so, and he seemed so kind and so devoted. Thus it went on, from week to week, there was always some excuse, and we went from place to place, and by degrees he began to grow irritable when I urged that we should be married at once. But it was so horrible to think he had deceived me, and never intended to marry me, that I would not let the idea come into my mind. Oh, Mrs. Lawrence, was I very wicked not to leave him at once?"

"My poor child—what could you do—alone, and friendless and penniless, in a foreign country?"

"But people say one ought to starve, rather than do wrong."

"Accept their dictum, dear Rose, when you have seen them face the alternative."

"Well, in spite of all, I clung to the hope he would do me justice at last; oh! you don't know, you cannot think what I went through. He first grew colder, and then indifferent. Then he became neglectful, and positively unkind, and he brought such dreadful people about me. Men who were

insolent, and used bad language, and such dreadful women! all painted, and so coarse; and when I remonstrated, he told me that was all the society I could expect now, and that if I did not like it I must stay by myself. And when I said I would rather do that, he left me more and more alone. Sometimes he was away for whole days, and I never saw a soul. And so it went on till, at last, I had lost all hope. I hardly know then how the time passed, or what happened, I felt half-stunned. At last we went to Munich, and I think it must have been after we had been there about a fortnight, that he told me he was going away—a sort of horror came over me then that he meant to desert me—and—oh, Mrs. Lawrence! when he went away, I was only just waiting till I was sure he was gone, to go out and try if I could not get laudanum enough, somehow, to poison myself; and then Mr. Gwynne came, and you know all the rest—”

The artlessly told tale was as complete as need be. The only too well learned lessons of vanity and worldliness had been probably handed on from generation to generation, until at last the results had chanced to fall in with circumstances calculated to develop their worst consequences, and the whole of the bitter harvest had been reaped by the one who was, perhaps, the least culpable of the whole line. Kate Lawrence was a woman who watched and thought, but she was not gifted with any miraculous powers of perfect and instant discernment of the right solution of all tangled subjects; and, as she listened, she felt as if the whole theory of moral responsibility was becoming a confused mass of contradictory dogmatic utterances in her

mind. Fortunately it was easier to see the right course of action, than to arrive at a satisfactory adjustment of abstract considerations; and she turned her thoughts resolutely to the practical side of things.

"Poor child," she said, "however wrong you may have been, you have been cruelly punished. But we will not talk any more about the past. We will rather think about what is best to be done for the future. For the present, you will remain here. Mr. Lawrence will go to-day and break it to your father and mother that you have come back, and then they will come and see you. You must be prepared to see a change in them, dear Rose. The fact of your never writing, made them feel sure Mr. Wycherley had played you false about the marriage, and you may fancy how unhappy they have been."

"Oh, poor papa and mamma!" and she began to sob again. "When did they find out?"

"Sooner than you expected." And she told her what had happened. "Mr. Smithson was very kind. He has been a true friend to you, Rose, and to your parents also, even at some professional loss to himself."

She did not choose to tell her actually that it had come to the rector's knowledge that, when honoured with a request to undertake medical charge of the Corbetts' establishment, Mr. Smithson had called, and remonstrated in such plain terms with the outspoken mistress of the house, that in dire wrath she had cashiered him likewise, and transferred her favours to Doctor Manning, of Willesbury. Poor

Rose's burden was heavy enough, without adding the knowledge of the scathing results of virtuous indignation.

"I think every one is very kind," Rose said, with a heavy sigh; "far kinder than I deserve. But the Huddlestons, Mrs. Lawrence, and poor George?"

"Dear Rose, I will be very candid with you. Mr. and Mrs. Huddlestone never liked the marriage. They felt, all along, that you did not love their son as he deserved to be loved; and it was only the manner of breaking it off which they regretted. They have been among your parents' kindest friends."

"They were quite right. I can appreciate George better now. I should not have made him happy. But oh, he did love me very much! Poor George! He would feel it dreadfully, I know. Where is he?"

"He is gone to Australia."

"Oh, Mrs. Lawrence! for good?"

"No, only for a time. He will be back in the autumn. Trust me, Rose, the best news he will receive while he is away, will be that you are come back. And you will live yet to see him happily married."

"Oh, I hope so! I am sure, I hope so!" But nevertheless Kate could see she winced a little at the suggestion. We are strangely contradictory mortals. Her grief for the sorrow she had brought upon her honest true-hearted lover was as sincere as it was deep, yet she did not altogether relish the suggestion of his finding efficient consolation in a more propitious love.

Before night Doctor and Mrs. Playfair knew that

their poor deluded child had come back; and Mrs. Playfair, a woman of too little force of character not to have grown nervously irritable under all her troubles, was sorely taxing her overworked husband by querulous lamentations and dismal forebodings.

"My poor darling child! Thank God, she is safe! Still—there's no denying it's only the end of one trouble, and the beginning of another. Trouble's a thing there's no end to. I'm sure it's most kind of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence to say she shall stay with them for the present, but that won't make the future any easier to settle. It's only putting off the trouble a bit."

"My dear Mary, how can you speak so? How can you find room for any thought save that our darling Rose is safe?"

"That's all very well, Charles, but none the less the question will come, what we are to do with her? God knows, she's never been out of my thoughts since the day she left us. Still I have other children to think of too. Now there's young Mr. Yardley, I am sure he admires Alice, and a nice steady fellow—and a capital business Waller & Yardley's, is—and you may depend, if Rose is at home, it'll likely keep him off. Young fellows are shy enough at first, and there'll be plenty trying for him, you may be sure of that. God forbid I should be hard upon my own child, and my first, too! Still I can't but think of the others. Yet we could never afford to pay for her anywhere. I'm sure I think Fred and his wife might let her come to them for a time, with never a child of their own, and a lively

place, too, where she'd have her thoughts occupied. I've a great mind to write and ask them about it. Fred was always fond of Rose."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," replied her husband, more sternly than she often heard him speak. "It shall never be said Rose was not welcome to her own home; and as for young Yardley! for God's sake, Mary, let us have no more trying at getting good marriages for the girls! It's sorely on my mind we were not wise with Rose."

"All very well, Charles. But I'd like to know whether not trying to get them settled will help to keep them if anything happens to you. Your practice will never more than keep and educate them, and where should we be if you got carried off suddenly, like Doctor Fowler, at Willesbury? I'm sure the thought has kept me awake many a night when you've been out."

The question was so unanswerable that Doctor Playfair felt constrained to leave the room abruptly, to mingle anxious communings over that constantly harassing burden of his own life with his devout thanksgivings for the safety of his darling Rose, as he paced slowly up and down the gravel walk behind the house.

But when, the following day, Mrs. Playfair saw before her the wreck of her once beautiful child, a mother's love bore down all a mother's prudential anxieties, and with almost a cry of anguish she caught the girl in her arms, and kissed and cried over her, as though she had been her one thought in all the world; and, rushing to the opposite extreme, she would fain have carried her home with

her at that very moment, and was ready to burst out upon her husband for heartlessness for insisting that Mrs. Lawrence's offer to keep Rose with her for a time was the best arrangement which could be made.

On their homeward way Mrs. Playfair paused as she was passing Cripps's shop. "Go on, Charles," she said. "I will follow directly. I want to speak to Mrs. Cripps."

Mrs. Cripps was upstairs, Cripps said; would Mrs. Playfair step into the back parlour, and she'd come down. And he ushered her through the shop with a fussy alacrity which was not altogether unlike the jubilant demonstration of a delighted mastiff puppy. In a few moments, Mrs. Cripps bounced into the room, and seizing Mrs. Playfair round the neck, kissed her heartily, and then throwing herself into a chair, cried and laughed by turns.

"You know then?" Mrs. Playfair said, readjusting herself with a rather startled air.

"Know? yes, to be sure. And so does all Monksford by this time, I'll warrant. Our foreman is keeping company with the kitchen maid at the Court, so it soon came round to us. Poor dear darling! and she's safe back? And how is she, poor dear?"

"Oh, dreadfully changed!" began the poor mother, in a quavering voice.

"Now, don't you take on, my dear. It'll be all right now. Just you give her time, and she'll get all right again."

"Oh, but it is terrible, Mrs. Cripps. He never married her!"

“And a precious good thing, too. I’ve no patience with that nonsense, ma’am. Because the poor dear had fallen into the hands of a nasty brute like him; and low, I’ll be bound, for all his fine blood—I’ve no mind to them Frenchmen—would you be for going and just tying her to him for life, hand and foot, so as she couldn’t escape any way? There’s no sense in it. If the devil didn’t put that notion into people’s heads, just to drive poor girls to ruin, I don’t know where it came from! I’ve no patience with such rubbish! Just you keep her quietly at home, and bide your time, and I’ll warrant you’ll live to see her married to some good man yet, who’ll think none the worse of her for all this, and ’ll make her a good husband.”

“Oh, if I could only think it!”

“Lord, Mrs. Playfair, it’s as sure as sure. You gentlefolk are downright silly! It’s only a case of being found out with you. I’ve a sister as has lived lady’s maid in great families all her life, and Lord! if you was to know some of the things she’s told me! Why, Miss Rose is an innocent baby compared to a lot of them fine young misses as is always showing themselves off in the parks, and making fine marriages, with a bishop and half-a-score of clergy to tie ’em up—and turning up their noses at women not a quarter as bad as themselves. You cheer up, and you’ll see it’ll all come right yet. And God bless our rector’s lady, I say; a real lady she is, to the backbone, and no mistake; and a good thing, in my humble opinion, as some who thinks a deal of themselves here should see what a real lady is, not as I suppose it’ll do ’em much good. ‘You can’t

make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,' as we say. But though I'm but a rough woman, I flatter myself I can tell a real lady when I see her as quick as anyone. And the rector's lady's a regular thoroughbred, and no mistake."

Mrs. Playfair went home in rather a confused state of mind, begining to have dim perceptions that her groove in life was rather a deep one. It seemed to her as if she had been suddenly jolted upwards to such an extent that she had caught a momentary glance of a very much wider world lying beyond her ken than she had ever before suspected to exist.

"Mr. Gwynne is gone, Rose," Mrs. Lawrence said to her that evening. "Mr. Lawrence and I are quite alone now. You must begin to come down stairs to-morrow. How are you off for clothes, my dear? You had not much luggage."

Rose coloured, hesitated, and glanced down at the plain travelling dress she wore. Then she came and knelt down beside Mrs. Lawrence's chair.

"I have some other things," she said, "but nothing that I like to wear except this dress. I bought this dress, and the hat I wore, with some money of my own, which I took away with me; but—I had nothing when I went away. No luggage, I mean. He bought everything for me, such things. Just see!"

And with a sudden impulse she sprang up, and crossing the room, tore out of her trunk a handsome bronze green silk, with a hat to match, and a richly embroidered walking jacket, trimmed with expensive fur, and flung them on the floor.

“Those are the kind of things he bought for me; as if being decked out in rich dresses could console me for being disgraced! I could not bear to wear the things he paid for. Mamma must send me some of my old things from home.”

“No, my child, I cannot allow that. Painful memories would cling round the clothes you wore before all this trouble came on you. I shall fit you out with some plain, suitable things. Nay, no thanks, dear. I have plenty of money, you know; far more than I want. I will send at once for such things as I should like you to wear.”

Mrs. Lawrence was a schemer, who did not lose sight of the cumulative force of a number of small causes all gravitating towards the same result. The style of dress which Rose Playfair should assume was part of her designs for the future.





CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN OUTRAGE ON SOCIETY.

THE parable of the Good Samaritan, being designed for a special case, has been narrowed within the limits required for the particular circumstances under consideration. To fit it for more general application, much amplification would have been possible.

There would, for instance, have been among those who appeared upon the scene, the man, probably a Pharisee, who, while filled with compassion for the suffering inflicted on a fellow-creature, would have recognised in the traveller a man of not irreproachable character, and have felt it a duty he owed to society to manifest his abhorrence of evil by spurning the wounded sinner as he passed.

Then there would have been another, whose action would seem hardly compatible with the fierce individuality which was the special feature of the Jewish character in that turbulent time—he might, probably, have been a Laodicean. He would have paused in his journey, to laud, with effusive commendation, the conduct of the good Samaritan; and

loudly to regret his own absolute inability to offer him any assistance in his work of charity, and would have departed, emphatically proclaiming his firm conviction that the Lord would reward him.

When the news burst like a thunderclap upon the ears of Monksford that Rose Playfair had returned home, and was actually domiciled at the Court, where it was apparently intended she should remain for the present, there was much agitation in the startled town, and Mrs. Tatnell knew that the success of an afternoon party, to which she had invited all her acquaintances on the occasion of her taking possession of her new house, was guaranteed. She had fixed this party to take place about a week after the return of the rector and his bride. They had returned on a Monday, which was considered a very strange thing for a clergyman to do, and the rules of good society in Monksford required that visits should not be paid after a wedding until the bride had appeared in church. By fixing her party for the following Monday, therefore, she had felt sure of securing the chance of a friendly discussion over the important question of calling at the Court, which was felt on all hands to be a matter attended with complications and difficulties, upon which friendly conference might throw some light.

Under ordinary circumstances, there could be no doubt that it was the duty of every person of good position in the town to call upon the rector's wife. But when that wife belonged unmistakably to the county families, and had, moreover, lived almost in the town for more than twelve months without any overtures of acquaintance, the case became com-

plicated. To call now might be held to imply that it was only as the rector's wife they had a right to seek her acquaintance, which was undoubtedly a possibility compromising to that peculiar quality which, in such circumstances, figures under the imposing title of self-respect; while the fact that it was universally admitted that Miss Tollmache had derogated in marrying Mr. Lawrence, suggested a still more insupportable hypothesis—the apparent admission that it was in consequence of her social descent they gained a right to her acquaintance.

Certainly the consideration of this grave and anxious question would, in itself, have been sufficient to afford Mrs. Tatnell's party abundant food for animated discourse. Now, its importance was almost thrust into the shade, by the new and exciting topic thus unexpectedly provided. Her guests mustered strong and early, with an air of cheerful expectation quite refreshing to behold, after the perceptible flatness of things during the last six weeks. Mrs. Corbett, bending to circumstances which, in the shape of her headstrong son, had been too strong for her, brought with her her intended daughter-in-law, whom she disliked nearly as cordially as that soft-voiced Madonna-like widow detested her; and her mood was clearly not in consequence less angular than usual.

“Certainly, the girl is there; there can be no doubt of that,” she said, in reply to a timid question from Mrs. Harrison, whether the fact was quite indubitable. “She arrived the very day they came home, and in company with some young man, too, who left the next day. I suppose they came back

on purpose to receive her. Well, it is Quixotic certainly, but no one, I should think, would be surprised at that in Mrs. Lawrence. Of course, I suppose she remains entirely in her own room; doesn't associate with them; so if they choose to saddle themselves with such an incubus it is their own affair."

"Indeed, you are quite mistaken," said Miss Witham, who never missed a chance of contradicting Mrs. Corbett. "She has been walking out this very day with Mrs. Lawrence."

There was quite a stir at this startling statement, a sort of delicious thrill of outraged respectability.

"Impossible!" "You must be mistaken!" "Where?" "When?" "I cannot believe it." Such phrases ran in a confused murmur all about the room.

"It is a fact," said Miss Witham. "I saw them myself. I was quite close to them. I went into the church to get a prayer-book I wanted, and was coming out, when I saw them coming into the churchyard through the private gate from the park. I was just in time to draw back into the porch, and they passed without seeing me. They went on through the churchyard and crossed the road into the rectory garden. They went into the house."

"And how did she look?" queried half-a-dozen eager voices.

"Who? Mrs. Lawrence?"

"No. Rose Playfair!" Miss Witham was the cynosure of all eyes. We all know that the most lofty-toned morality is by no means inconsistent

with a keen thirst for information on every topic connected with the doings of sinners.

“Well, I must admit she is immensely improved. I mean in general appearance. Her face I could hardly see through her veil. I thought she looked pale, and thinner. But her dress was perfect, inexpensive and rigidly simple, but in such exquisite taste. Quite Parisian—very unlike her old country town style. I have rarely seen a more elegant looking girl out of London.”

There was a pause—a sort of stunned calm. This was horrible—an outrage on society! meriting only that Mrs. Lawrence should be cut by all respectable people, if it could be possibly supposed such treatment would be of the slightest consequence to her. If she chose to risk contamination in her own house, that was her own affair. But to thrust vice, and vice rendered attractive, in the way of her neighbours! By every law of charity and social good faith she stood condemned.

“I declare, it is monstrous!” exclaimed Mrs. Collier at length, almost with tears. “It’s an outrage on the feelings of every mother in the town. I am sure I hope, if Mrs. Lawrence ever lives to see daughters growing up around her, she may not have bitter cause to rue such lax conduct.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Corbett, launching her shafts with her usual impartiality. “Just think of it! This girl, who was of old admitted to be the prettiest in the town, come back after her little escapade to be taken up at the Court and exhibited among you in all the inimitable attraction of perfect Parisian costume. That severely simple style, one

knows, is only to be ventured upon by the very first milliners in the land. What will become of all your daughters?"

"You would not speak in that way if you had any yourself, Mrs. Corbett," retorted Mrs. Collier, with grave disapprobation.

"Oh, but I'm going to have one! I really begin to feel quite uneasy about Agnes here. Her morals may suffer. My dear, I am sure I shall not venture to take you when I go to call at the Court."

"Ah! what is one to do about that?" chimed in several voices.

"I don't know what you all mean to do. I mean to call. I have no particular admiration for either the rector or his wife, but it would be unpleasant to oneself to hold aloof."

"But suppose the girl should appear?"

"I shall simply take not the least notice of her. And if Mrs. Lawrence does not keep her entirely in the shade, I for one shall very soon tell her what I think of the whole business."

"Well, it would be very awkward not to be on visiting terms with the rector's wife," said Mrs. Collier, reflectively. "I shall certainly not take my girls with me, however, until I see what is to happen. Fancy, feeling one cannot take one's daughters to one's clergyman's house! It is really shocking!"

"Terrible!" said Mrs. Corbett. "If I had daughters, I should write to the Bishop."

"Well, really," chimed in Mrs. Roberts, "I think you are all making too much of it. I feel with Mrs. Collier, that I should not like to take my daughters

to the house; but even if it is a little Quixotic, I cannot help admiring Mrs. Lawrence's kindness. Were I as independent as she is, I am sure I should have felt very glad if I could have helped the poor girl to lead a different life. Of course, circumstanced as I am, I could not possibly do anything."

"My dear Mrs. Roberts," remonstrated Miss Witham, "we have our duty to society to consider. The guilty must not be screened at the expense of the innocent. I cannot imagine anyone so conversant as Mrs. Lawrence must be with the usages of good society intruding this girl on her visitors. Should she, however, do so, I for one shall at once let her know that she must not expect to see me in her house."

"Will that break her heart?" asked Mrs. Corbett sarcastically.

"I should imagine she would not care in the very least," replied Miss Witham superbly. "My action would be prompted by consideration for myself, not for her."

At this juncture an unusual element appeared in the discussion, in the shape of a distinct opinion from Mrs. Buller. She had, of course, been invited, and an afternoon party not necessitating any outrageous extravagance in the shape of carriage hire, Mr. Octavius Buller had graciously expressed his opinion that she had better go. She had been listening to the conversation, with sundry symptoms of agitation and excitement, and now suddenly broke in,—

"I do think it's a very unkind way to look at it. Rose Playfair quite believed Mr. Wycherley would

marry her. A great many girls have run away, and no one thought the worse of them afterwards, because the men they trusted have behaved honourably. Why should all the blame be thrown on poor Rose, because Mr. Wycherley wasn't honourable? I feel very sorry for her."

Having delivered this speech, the poor little woman gathered herself up, as though preparing to receive a storm of missiles, and sat bolt upright on the edge of her chair, turning white and red by turns at feeling herself the momentary centre of attraction to the whole room.

There was a little murmur here and there. "Poor little thing, of course *she* feels it," "Awkward subject in her presence," and similar whispers floated about. In her softest, most silvery tone, Mrs. Campbell said, —

"Then I suppose, Mrs. Buller, you will be going to visit the fair delinquent?"

"I've been to see her already, Mrs. Campbell. I went up to the Court this morning, and asked Mrs. Lawrence if I might see her; and I sat with her for half-an-hour, poor child. I could not see the improvement Miss Witham talks about. She was very nicely dressed, but she looks very pale and sad. I couldn't have rested, if I hadn't told her how sorry I was she'd ever met Mr. Wycherley at our house. No, thank you, Mrs. Tatnell, not any more tea, and I think, if you'll excuse me, I'll be going. Mr. Buller will be coming home soon."

She shuffled quickly out of the room, her momentary courage all expended in this defiant thrust at the morality of the town, not even giving Mrs. Corbett time to vent a sneer she had ready respect-

ing the certainty that Rose Playfair would assert *now*, that Mr. Wycherley had promised to marry her.

After a little desultory talk over this unexpected championship, the conversation drifted back to the all-important question of calling at Wycherley Court; and it appeared to be the general feeling of the community, that it was desirable to do so, only that, under existing possibilities, the pastures were risky for the lambs of the flock, who had therefore better be left safe under watch and ward at home.

Good Mrs. Buller might have astonished her audience considerably more than she had done, had she been so minded; for she might have told them how Mrs. Lawrence, on learning her errand, had not only manifested most cordial friendliness, but had insisted on her staying to luncheon, and had begged her to come and see Rose whenever she had time to do so. But the little woman had no sense of importance or quick sensibility with regard to her position, so it never occurred to her to regard such treatment as matter for boastful proclamation. She only thought Mrs. Lawrence very kind, and her poor, lonely heart expanded in grateful affection towards her.

Of course, she duly told her husband all that had passed, and his first startled amazement rapidly passed into a sense of extreme satisfaction, which rendered him gracious towards her beyond all remembered precedent. Had she told him what she meditated, he would probably have peremptorily forbidden it; but she had acted on an impulse, without waiting to consult him, with a result which fully justified that impulse.

What could be a more emphatic negative to the stories afloat, than that his wife should be received by the rector and Mrs. Lawrence as a friend to Rose Playfair? And what more delightful to himself than to proclaim openly,—“My wife is charmed with Mrs. Lawrence. She lunched at the Court yesterday. She is often there?” Or what more desirable for the furtherance of his own ends, than the establishment of such communications with Wycherley Court? He actually began to regard the pale, neutral-tinted little woman opposite to him with a certain amount of respect.

“You have done quite right, Louisa,” he said condescendingly; “and after the ill-natured slanders got up, I feel very glad that you should show kindness to that poor girl. It is the best possible contradiction to them. But really, my dear, if you are going to visit great people in this way, you must think of your dress. Go and choose a really handsome black silk for yourself, to-morrow. I observed on Sunday the one you wore was a little shabby.”

“Oh, thank you, Octavius,” she cheerfully replied. She felt as if unexpected attentions and favours were being rained upon her in bewildering profusion, and was disposed, in a dim, confused sort of way, to regard the fact as a special mark of Divine approval of her kind feelings towards Rose Playfair.

Mr. Octavius Buller’s serene approbation of the progress of events might possibly have undergone some diminution, had he been aware of a conversation which had taken place that same afternoon between the rector and his wife. Mr. Lawrence had

been out nearly all the day, and when he joined Kate in the drawing-room, late in the afternoon, she told him of Mrs. Buller's visit.

"She is a good, kind little soul," she said, "and I think her coming has cheered the poor girl wonderfully. Lionel," and she came close up to him and clasped her hands round his arm, with an anxious look, detecting in a moment a flitting shadow cross his face, "what is it? Was I wrong to ask her to come again?"

"No, I think not," he replied thoughtfully. "I was only thinking of the accusations which have been made. She would have no part in any rascality, and no doubt regards them as infamous slanders. Perhaps they partly brought her,—she is a kind-hearted little soul."

"She said to me that she never could forget that Rose had met Mr. Wycherley at dinner at their house; and she assured me Mr. Buller regretted it as much as herself."

"Poor little woman! But, Kate, I have something to tell you. I heard it before we were married, in Willesbury. Buller has taken up all the mortgages on this property at very low interest. Since I heard that, I have interested myself somewhat in the affairs of that gentleman. He is a most notorious usurer in all such transactions, in general; he is making money very fast. Yardley told me the other day that some years since he invested a large sum in a speculation worth next to nothing at the moment. He said it would turn out a fortune to anyone who could afford to lock up some money for a few years; and he has proved right. The thing

is just beginning to pay enormously. Waller & Yardley have a very large business, and have often come across him. Yardley says he is one of the shrewdest, most unprincipled, and most ambitious men he has ever come across."

"Do ask him to dinner, Lionel. I should like, of all things, to have an opportunity of minute, scientific investigation of such a splendid specimen of the genus rascal."

He stooped to kiss her. The impulse to do so was irresistible to him when those bright, mirthful gleams, which always accompanied her quaint ideas, flitted across her expressive face. "Exercise your powers of investigation, my wee darling," he said, "in considering why such a shrewd rascal should have invested a large sum in mortgages at very low interest, without any chance of thereby increasing his capital."

Rose came in at the moment, and checked all further discussion of the question. That week had done much for her. She was gentle, quiet, and rather sad, but had lost a good deal of the stricken look of wretchedness which had sent such a pang to her mother's heart at the first sight of her.

Those were lovely bright early summer days in Monksford, and it is not too much to say that the sunny sky and genial atmosphere conspired to keep the town in a state of irritating ignorance of much desirable information. Shoals of visitors arrived at the Court to find that Mrs. Lawrence was out, and contented themselves, as best they might, with leaving cards. Disappointed numbers found her cards awaiting them on their return home, on days when they

had never supposed it to be in the least likely that she would call. Miss Witham, it is true, had been sufficiently favoured by fortune to find Mrs. Lawrence at home, and had autocratically pronounced her a person of distinguished manner and appearance; but not perfectly throughbred; as indeed no one could be who assumed that sort of independence of tone for which Mrs. Lawrence was remarkable. On being eagerly questioned, she said that she had seen Rose Playfair, but only in the distance, walking in the garden with, she thought, her mother, as she was herself leaving the house. Her experience therefore left the great question of the intended extent of Mrs. Lawrence's defiance of social codes still unsolved.

The carelessness with which Mrs. Lawrence distributed her cards, without regard to special at-home days, which were duly noted on the cards left for her, was felt to be a circumstance calculated to raise uneasy sensations.

"I think it is a marked slight," Mrs. Tatnell said. "When I write on my card, 'at home every Thursday afternoon,' and then a lady comes to call on Tuesday or Wednesday, what can I think but that she does not care whether I am at home or not? Not what one would expect from one's clergyman's wife, certainly."

It chanced, however, one day that Mrs. Lawrence, calling upon Mrs. Daniels, did hit upon "her afternoon," and appeared unexpectedly in the midst of a lively discussion over her own proceedings. This happened about a month after her return home. Rose Playfair was still at the Court; her own family were often with her, and she had frequently been

at her father's house. Moreover, she had been seen more than once in Mrs. Lawrence's close carriage, and it had been positively ascertained that she was treated in the house in all respects as an ordinary visitor; save that, as yet, she had never been visible when any strangers were there.

"Yes," Mrs. Corbett had said, just before Mrs. Lawrence was announced; "but you may depend it is only *as yet*. She is wise enough not to go too far all at once, but you may depend she'll try and force that girl upon us before long. If you are all so hoodwinked by her free and easy manners as to suppose she doesn't calculate that she's the great lady here, and we're all to follow humbly in her lead, I can only say I am not; and I mean to take the first opportunity of letting her know, very plainly, what is my opinion, and how I mean to act."

The appearance of Mrs. Lawrence on the scene, almost before anyone had time to reply to this speech, seemed to be something above the range of coincidences, and produced a sort of breathless hush for a moment. If a man chooses to call spirits from the vasty deep, and they do come, he cannot then beat a dismayed and terrified retreat without laying himself open to lasting contempt and ridicule. Mrs. Corbett was not the woman to face such a position. She was felt to be pledged to signal combat with the rector's wife, whose stately grace, and easy unconscious dignity of manner, seemed to promise that the encounter would be no ordinary one.

That very easy dignified self-possession produced a sort of modified bristling up in the assembly. A certain nervous shyness was, according to all pre-

cedent, the fitting characteristic of a bride paying her first wedding visits. Did not this imperturbable coolness imply an assumption of superiority, strongly bearing out Mrs. Corbett's opinion respecting Mrs. Lawrence's probable sentiments? It looked strangely like it.

Mrs. Daniels was painfully nervous. It seemed as if some malignant fate presided over meetings in her drawing-room, whether accidental or otherwise. She strove with laudable perseverance to keep the conversation away from inflammatory topics, and Mrs. Lawrence followed her lead in an easy, unconstrained way, which for a time rendered her efforts eminently successful. Perhaps they might have been entirely so, had not her evil genius suddenly brought Mrs. Buller upon the scene. The splendours of her new black silk, to which, for purposes of his own, the great Octavius had, with lavish liberality, added a handsome cloak and bonnet, had inspired the little woman with a cheerful sense of personal importance. Does not every woman feel a certain depressing influence to lurk in the consciousness that her clothes are poorer, shabbier, or less well made than those of her neighbours. Mrs. Buller felt quite a satisfaction in paying visits in her new garments, and she walked into Mrs. Daniels's drawing-room with a sprightly alacrity not usual in her. Mrs. Lawrence's presence inspired her with additional courage, and she returned her greeting with cordial confidence, which by no means tended to decrease the general tendency to bristle. Of course, none of them intended to stand any airs of superiority from the rector's wife; still, it was not

exactly pleasant to see this insignificant little woman, on whom every one looked down, actually betraying a certain amount of intimacy with the late Miss Tollmache, while most of those present could hardly hope she even knew who they were!

Within five minutes after her entrance, Mrs. Buller, who had but a dim apprehension of the entanglements of Monksford social life, shattered at one fell blow the rising fabric of Mrs. Daniels's hopes. In a momentary pause in conversation she said, with a cheerful air of having hit upon a pleasant topic,—

“I saw Rose, yesterday, while you were out, Mrs. Lawrence. Did she tell you? I thought, her looking so much better, poor girl! You are quite a sorceress!”

“She has certainly rallied very much,” Kate replied, “but I think the sorcery consists only in encouraging her to look hopefully forward to the future—an innocent sort of magic.”

“Well, I don't know about sorcery,” Mrs. Corbett began, in a tone which made Mrs. Daniels's heart give a great jump. “When a girl who has disgraced herself in such a way as Rose Playfair has done, finds herself petted and made much of when she comes back, I should say it's only natural she should soon learn to put a good face on the matter.”

A curious expression flitted across Mrs. Lawrence's face at these words; a sort of flash of mingled recognition and amusement, which somewhat disconcerted the speaker, who was looking straight at her. The words had, in fact, brought so strongly to Kate's mind some descriptions given her of Mrs.

Corbett by the rector, that she instantly divined who it was who had thus gallantly led the van in the attack which he had warned her she would certainly have to stand.

"I do not think poor Rose has had much petting bestowed upon her," she said, quietly.

"Oh, of course, it's easy enough to cavil about terms. Her being received as she has been received by the rector and yourself, Mrs. Lawrence, is what I mean. Of course no one has any right to dictate to you on such a subject, but when you come to speak of encouraging her to look hopefully forward to the future, it seems as if you meant to imply you thought other people might do as you have done; and I think it is very desirable any mistake on that point should be put out of the question at once. Rose Playfair need not expect to be noticed in Monksford."

"I think you are making a little mistake. Rose has already been not only noticed, but most kindly welcomed by at least one old acquaintance in Monksford," and she made a little motion towards Mrs. Buller—"and has also found a warm friend in Mrs. Dale."

"Oh, as for that," Mrs. Corbett replied, rather insolently, "the curate must of course follow the rector's lead; and there may be a few exceptions in the town, but I speak for myself, and I know I express the sentiments of most ladies in Monksford. Of course we are all very glad Rose should have been induced to leave this man she's been living with, but she has disgraced herself, and we all feel it to be a duty we owe to society not to take any

notice of her. *We* think it would have been truer charity to send her to a penitentiary, or a sisterhood, or some such place."

"Is it quite certain that Rose has disgraced herself?" Mrs. Lawrence asked, in a quiet but penetrating tone, which made the question audible through the whole room.

"I should not have thought that question difficult to answer," replied Mrs. Corbett, venturing on a sarcastic vein. "She has run away from her friends, and lived for some months with a man without being married to him. I believe that is generally held to be a disgraceful proceeding in any girl."

"She eloped with a man who promised to marry her instantly, always a wrong and foolish action, but not what is generally meant by saying a girl has disgraced herself. If Mr. Wycherley had kept his promise, and brought Rose back to live in good style at the Court, as lady of the manor, I think you would have taken a different view of your duty to society. Is it quite fair to visit so severely upon her the mere fact of having been most cruelly deceived?"

"No, Mrs. Lawrence, I am sure it is not," said little Mrs. Buller, quite audaciously, "and I'm only sorry that I'm a person of so little consequence in Monksford, that my standing by Rose is no great help to her; else I'm sure I'd do everything I could for her, poor girl!"

"Your kindness has greatly cheered her already, Mrs. Buller, and is doubly valuable as coming from one against whom not the most malicious tongue has a word to say."

Mrs. Buller was too much astonished at being thus publicly complimented to do anything save flush and look nervously delighted, and Mrs. Corbett dashed again into the fight.

“Of course, Mrs. Buller has a right to her own opinion, but I don’t think there are many people will agree to your reasoning, Mrs. Lawrence. We have only Rose’s own assertion that Mr. Wycherley ever promised to marry her.”

“Coupled with the fact of her leaving him when she found that he would not fulfil his promise, facing all the pain and distress of returning to her home rather than remain with him.”

“She stayed with him for six months, at any rate.”

“Could she do otherwise? Alone and penniless, in a foreign country, with but most imperfect knowledge of the language. She left him the moment a feasible chance of getting home was offered to her.”

“Well, she has certainly found a staunch supporter. Perhaps you will also defend her conduct towards George Huddleston?”

“I think I have already said that I consider her conduct to have been very foolish and very wrong. I simply claim for her the right to stand on the same footing as any girl who elopes. For the cruel position in which Mr. Wycherley’s duplicity has placed her she ought not to be held responsible, save for the folly of placing herself thus in any man’s power. Her conduct to Mr. Huddleston I consider the worst part of the whole transaction; but it is not conduct generally held to necessitate a girl being wholly banished from society. Neither, in her case, are extenuating circumstances wholly

wanting. She was drawn away from Mr. Huddleston by a man whose reputation for power of fascination is widespread, and who easily persuaded her inexperience that he loved her as devotedly as she certainly loved him. Have you not known of girls breaking off marriages with men to whom they had engaged themselves, in order to marry men for whom they did not profess to care,—sometimes quite old men, merely for the sake of money? To my thinking such girls are far more indefensible than poor Rose. Yet it is not thought a duty to society to stand aloof from them.”

Mrs. Corbett rose with a flaming visage. “I think this subject has been pursued quite far enough,” she said. “I can only add, that I am sure we shall all deeply regret finding ourselves at issue with our own clergyman on a point of deep moral importance to society.”

“Yes, indeed,” chimed in Mrs. Collier, rising also, with a little less disturbed countenance. “I quite agree with you, Mrs. Corbett. I look upon the whole circumstance as quite a disaster to the town.”

They said good-bye to Mrs. Daniels, with an odd mixture of embarrassment, and righteous deprecation of the lax moral theories with which her drawing-room had been polluted, and saluting the offender with the unbending rigidity which was their best substitute for dignified stateliness, disappeared in company. Then Mrs. Tatnell whispered a hasty aside to Mrs. Buller, whose pale little eyes positively twinkled for a moment; Miss Witham exchanged a somewhat malicious smile with Mrs. Campbell, and Mrs. Daniels, fidgeting nervously with the tea-

cups, began hastily to talk on some wholly indifferent subject.

These symptoms were not lost upon Mrs. Lawrence; and on her return home she briefly narrated to her husband what had passed, and demanded an explanation. He threw himself back in his chair and laughed loud and long.

"Oh, Kate, Kate!" he exclaimed, when he at last found voice to speak.

"Well, what have I done?"

"Done, child? Why, exploded a perfect infernal machine in their very midst. Both those excellent females have done the very thing you denounced so emphatically; at least, I believe so. Of course the facts were long before my time. Corbett is twenty years older than his wife, and was even more of an asthmatic invalid when she married him than he is now; but he was well off, and certain of increasing fortune, and her people were poor, so she threw over some young fellow she was engaged to in order to marry him. Mrs. Collier was a Miss Waller, niece of the Willesbury man, and daughter to the then head of the firm. Collier is a coarse, vulgar brute, who was a clerk in their office, and had a fortune left to him. I believe she had refused him most contemptuously before; but when this came about she forthwith threw over Yardley, to whom she was engaged, and took him. You smote them both hip and thigh, my love!"

"I am so glad I did not know all this."

"Well, of course, you would not have said it then."

"No, and that is just what I should have regretted," she answered with a roguish smile.

"Oh, Kate, Kate, you are a wicked wee gipsy!" he answered, drawing her to him, and kissing the mischievously curling lips. "But you see how it is to be, my darling! What are you going to do about that girl? Is she to do seductive penitence in becoming array for the rest of her life? You cannot keep her here when your father returns; at least, I should think he would hardly like it."

"It would never do. But why do you talk of penitence, Lionel? Has she any special cause for penitence, save for having behaved dishonourably to a very excellent man?"

"I do not think she has. But she has cause to rue bitterly a great folly. I was speaking from the conventional point of view—the results—a great sin, or a great folly, it is much the same to the world, which never forgives—failure."

"Rose would never be either a great sinner or a sensational penitent. She has not character enough to figure in either capacity. She is simply an amiable, rather silly girl, who has had an immense deal of folly knocked out of her by a very cruel lesson. She will have to suffer a great deal, but she will have a better chance of happiness in the future than she would ever have had without it."

"Still, you do not say what you intend."

"My intention is, that she shall ultimately marry Mr. Smithson, for whom we will buy a practice in some place far away from here."

"My dear Kate!" exclaimed the rector, rather taken aback.

"Ah, you are surprised! I do not wonder at that. The plan bursts upon you in its full development,

without any preparation. It has grown gradually with me, until it appears the most natural and likely thing in the world. Rose, in her simple dress, and with a slight shade of melancholy about her, is, I must say, simply exquisite. In a week or two she is to go and board with the Dales. Mrs. Dale is in my confidence. Mr. Smithson is often with them; he and Mr. Dale are great friends. He was a little in love before; the rest is certain. When his love has sufficiently developed itself to prevent the least danger of any appearance of offering him a bribe to marry her, we will offer him a practice in order to facilitate his wishes in the matter. And if I may judge by the way in which he looked at her the other day at the Dales, it will not be very long first."

"All very good. But—will she take him?"

"My dear Lionel, Rose is a girl who would marry any man who asked her; and Mr. Smithson is, I should imagine, just the sort of good, kind-hearted, common-place man suited for such a wife. She will make him a good one now, I am sure, which is more than she would probably have done had she not had this sharp lesson."

Lionel Lawrence sat silent for a moment. Then he said,—“Well, of all the practical women I ever met—” He did not finish the sentence.

“Would you have me make a general hash of everything, by trying to introduce romance where there is no room for it? Rose has no capacity for deep feeling of any sort, and to credit her with it, and act as if she possessed it, would only end in either absurdity or disaster.”

“And is any one else in your confidence?”

“Only Mrs. Huddleston, who is in a silent ecstasy over the plan. I am certain she had fears about George coming back. They are arranging for him to stay away six months longer than was originally intended, which delay will, I hope, save him from the pain of meeting her at all.”

Thus it appeared that by different routes the patrician Mrs. Lawrence and the plebian Mrs. Cripps had arrived at much the same conclusion: that result being probably brought about by the fact of each possessing a considerable fund of sound common sense; in other words, a quick and accurate perception of the just value of things, both absolutely and relatively, to one another, which would perhaps be more correctly termed sound sense about common things.





CHAPTER XXXVII.

MR. BULLER MEETS WITH A PITFALL.

WITH anguish which not even the thought of the charming villa, on possession of which Mr. Moss had arranged to enter at midsummer, could dispel, Mrs. Moss had watched from her drawing-room window the various callers passing and repassing through the grey old gateway of Wycherley Court. The Olympians she could contemplate unmoved by any feeling beyond ordinary curiosity; they were too far removed from her sphere to excite any feeling more powerful than envious admiration of their Paris bonnets. She could even comment without the slightest feeling of neighbourly satisfaction on the waning charms of the elder Jarvises. It was the sight of the dwellers in Monksford itself streaming through the gateway which filled her cup of bitterness to the brim.

“Why, who on earth is that?” she said to her daughter. “It’s one of Sampson’s flies. I can’t make out who is inside.”

“It’s Mrs. Roberts, mamma.”

“Never! So it is, and with that dirty page smartened up and stuck on the box. She going to call, indeed! Well, the impudence of some people beats everything! I declare it’s a downright shame,” she went on querulously, “the way people look at things. If I went to call, I suppose I’d get told at the door Mrs. Lawrence didn’t receive visits from shop people; and where’s she a bit better? Her father was old Figgins, who had a shop in London for years; and what are Mr. Roberts’s flour mills over at Ripley but a shop without the name? He sells flour to the bakers, from whom people buy; and wherever the difference is between selling things to people to sell again, and selling them direct to people to use themselves, I never can see, and that’s just all the difference between a wholesale and a retail business. I’m sure your papa’s a sight richer than Mr. Roberts—they do say he mostly carries on business with borrowed money—and much more the gentleman too; and yet he’s looked down upon for having a shop. It’s all having a horrid shop. If he was only entirely in the wholesale line, and had a great warehouse, it would be all right; we’d be received with the best. It’s all the shop does it, and it’s a downright shame. Who’s that now, Maria?”

“Mrs. Corbett, mamma.”

“Well, now, there’s another. What does he do but sell wine? Just as your papa sells groceries—and none of the best at the price, I’m told—and he doesn’t sell only to dealers. I know lots of people get their wine direct from him, and the bills sent in just like any other tradesman. Why should they be able to hold up their heads in that way? Just

because they haven't a shop. Well, thank Heaven! we sha'n't be living over it much longer, that'll be something gained. Mrs. Thornbury was saying to me, only the last time I was over at Willesbury, that they'd got into much better society after they left the shop, and went and lived the other side of the town. It stands to reason people shouldn't like to come and call at a shop. It's quite different with your villa, standing in its own grounds, and everything quite genteel. But it is very ridiculous the way people look at things, certainly."

Mrs. Moss was, however, doomed to yet lower depths of mortification. A few days later her daughter startled her with the sudden exclamation,—

"Mamma! there are Mr. and Mrs. Buller going in at the Court gateway!"

"Never! Well, I'm sure! Just look how he's straddling along with his toes turned out, for all the world as if he was somebody, instead of a man with not much character, save what he'd be lucky to be rid of."

"But look at her, mamma! I never saw her dressed up like that before."

"No, indeed. Poor woman! I wonder when she last had a new silk? not this many a day, I know. Well, it's all very well to let her go and see Rose Playfair—though, however, she could have the face to do it, after all that's been said, is more than I can understand. But if she and Buller get in to pay a formal visit, I'm sure respectable people need not mind being kept out. I saw the rector go in just before two o'clock, and no one's come out since, so

it's likely they're at home. Watch and see, Maria, how soon the Bullers come back."

Maria kept faithful watch, but nearly three-quarters of an hour had elapsed before she was able to report that the audacious pair were returning along the old elm avenue. "Then they must have got in," Mrs. Moss said, dropping her work upon her lap, and her hands upon her work, as though the certainty brought some sort of paralysing shock. "Well they do say Mrs. Lawrence is quite eccentric; and it stands to reason, Mr. Lawrence having married a great lady and an heiress, and being, as one may say, taken into the house, can't be much but a cipher. Still I shouldn't have expected that."

Mrs. Moss was hardly so much astonished at the events of the day as Mr. Buller had been, when her husband autocratically desired at breakfast that she would be ready at three o'clock to go with him to call at Wycherley Court.

"Call at the Court, Octavius?" she gasped.

"Yes, my dear. I said call at the Court, You have been several times, I know, to see Rose Playfair; but I wish you to go with me, to-day, to pay a formal visit to Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence."

"But—I—we—I mean, ought we to call upon them, Octavius?"

A stony glare in answer made her tremble. "I expressed my intention to do so, Louisa. I am aware that your family were in trade; mine moved in very different society. I believe that I am not a gentleman likely to make a mistake on such a point."

Mr. Octavius Buller's ring at the door-bell of

Wycherley Court was one calculated to convey to all hearers the fact that some one of no ordinary importance demanded admission. "Heavens!" exclaimed Kate, springing up to peep through a convenient window, "who can it possibly be? Oh, my dear, good Mrs. Buller. Dear little woman! she has got on her new silk gown. How nice she looks! But she never gave such a peal as that," and Kate cautiously ventured upon a little further investigation. "Oh, Lionel, *he* is there himself, in all his unshrouded glory! Oh, sight too dazzling for mortal eyes! Delicious! They have come to call in state on the rector and rectoress. Now, I shall have a chance of minute personal inspection of rascality incarnate."

"Hush, hush, madcap!"

"Wait till you hear what Rose let out to me this morning," she replied in a low tone, almost as the door opened; and then she turned to receive the visitors—Mrs. Buller, with that frank, genial kindness which at their first interview had fallen like a ray of warm sunshine upon the chilled heart of the neglected little woman; Mr. Buller, with a certain slightly haughty dignity, which, however, appeared in his eyes to be only a stateliness of manner fitting the grave importance of a meeting with a distinguished person.

No doubt of having been born to work havoc among women had ever crossed the mind of Octavius Buller. He regarded the whole sex with condescending tenderness, assuming the attitude of a sort of irresponsible destroying angel, touched with pity for the suffering it was his irrevocable destiny to

inflict. He was therefore in no way surprised at finding that Mrs. Lawrence at once directed her conversation to himself, leaving to the rector the task of finding small talk for Mrs. Buller.

This somewhat arduous task Mr. Lawrence performed spasmodically. Only some gravely important occupation would ever, when the woman he adored was present, have interrupted the undercurrent of keen perception of every movement of hers which flowed beneath his outward and visible words and actions. On the present occasion he was perfectly conscious of some definite though unexplained purpose on her part, and strove at one and the same moment to listen to what she and Mr. Buller were saying, and to make conversation for Mrs. Buller, rather to the detriment of the latter, always somewhat difficult occupation.

"Oh, charming weather," he said, "delightfully early season. I never remember everything so forward at this time."

Then he paused. "I trust that Mr. Tollmache and yourself, Mrs. Lawrence, continue to like this place? A most charming residence you have certainly made it."

"Yes," Kate replied, most graciously. "We continue to like it extremely."

"Certainly the place is wonderfully changed, is it not, Mrs. Buller?" the rector said, trying to edge her and himself into the conversation. "One can hardly recall what it was like two years since."

"No, indeed," she said; "I'm sure it was a most fortunate day for Monksford when Mr. Tollmache

took the place; and however a gentleman could fancy it as it was then, I can never think."

"Oh, yes, 'exactly,'" he vaguely replied. "I am delighted to hear that Mr. Tollmache continues to be pleased with the pasture land I was fortunate enough to secure for him," Mr. Buller was saying. "I am sure we all hope he may long continue to require it."

"Well, I do not know," Mrs. Lawrence replied; "I fear my father has improved the place to a dangerous extent."

"Indeed?" There was just the faintest touch of a startled tone in the word.

"Yes. It is not always safe to make a place which is not one's own too attractive. Have you heard no rumour of Mr. Wycherley being in treaty with some very wealthy Scotchman, who wants to buy a place in England near a good hunting country, and will give any money for a place he fancies? I fear if anyone comes to look at Wycherley Court now, it may prove dangerously attractive."

All small talk vanished from the rector's thoughts, and from Mrs. Buller's also. She looked at the speaker with excited interest, he with startled surprise. Mrs. Lawrence looked at neither of them, but straight at Mr. Buller, with calm, candid eyes. He started at her words, changed colour perceptibly, and replied, with some little agitation of manner,—

"Indeed! I have heard of nothing of the kind. I—I think if there had been any truth in the report, I think I must have heard of it. I—may I venture to ask, Mrs. Lawrence, where you got this information?"

“Oh, I don't think I must give any authority. Mr. Haigg would doubtless know about it. But then it would not do to ask him questions touching his master's affairs. I certainly hope we may not find, when our lease expires, that the place has been sold over our heads.”

“Mr. Tollmache has no thought of buying the place himself, then?” Mr. Buller asked, with ill-suppressed eagerness of manner.

“Oh dear, no! I am quite sure my father has never thought of such a thing.”

“Well, I am sure I sincerely trust this rumour may prove wholly unfounded. Indeed I cannot think there can be any truth in it. In fact I feel convinced there cannot be,” Mr. Buller said, emphasising his words with the air of a man trying extremely hard to persuade himself.

Mrs. Lawrence smilingly trusted he was right in this conviction, and began to talk of something else to Mrs. Buller. But Mr. Buller continued evidently disturbed and ill at ease, and ere long peremptorily signalled to his wife that it was time to go.

“My dear Kate, what is the meaning of all this?” Lionel asked, as soon as the door had closed behind the departing visitors.

Mrs. Lawrence, with most undignified frivolity, took one or two turns of a waltz round the room, and then drawing up just before her husband, seized his coat collar on each side and shook him.

“You dear old blind bat! did you not see that the creature turned perfectly green when I suggested the idea of a sale of the place?”

"I never looked at him. I was gazing at you in mute amazement."

"That is just where you made a mistake. You can look at me, with or without amazement, whenever you like. You may never again have a chance of watching the speaking countenance of Mr. Octavius Buller under circumstances so calculated to lead to correct surmises."

"I do not understand. Who is this Scotchman of whom you spoke?"

"The momentary offspring of my own ingenious imagination, having, as far as I know, no existence in any part of the known world. How sweetly puzzled you look! You do not know all. Listen, Lionel," she continued more gravely. "I have thought a good deal of what you told me about this man taking up the Wycherley mortgages on such low terms, and this morning I put the direct question to Rose, whether Mr. Buller had had a share, in any way, in her elopement. She seemed very much startled, and confessed that some suspicions had crossed her own mind, though she had rejected them, because she could not conceive what possible object he could have had in so doing. But she admitted to me then that she got ball tickets from Mr. Wycherley the night she met him at dinner at the Bullers' house. Now a man is not very likely to be carrying ball tickets about in evening-dress pockets without some design; therefore I opine that he knew he was going to meet her; and that the clerk probably spoke the truth when he said that he had heard her name mentioned in conversation between those two worthies."

“But his motive?”

She looked up earnestly into his face, as she gravely answered,—“To make the neighbourhood too hot for Mr. Wycherley, so that when he, Buller, watching carefully for the right moment, forecloses as mortgagee, Mr. Wycherley shall be the more disposed to accept his proposition to buy the property from him, which under the circumstances he would be able to do on terms most advantageous to himself. Avarice and ambition will then be reconciled. He will have made a splendid bargain, and will be able to set up for a county man, at least to flaunt the semblance ostentatiously in the face of all Monksford, and, if he can get rid of his present wife, marry, I daresay, Clarissa Jarvis!”

“It is a plausible enough theory, certainly. You are an ingenious little woman.”

“It is plausible enough in mere theory; but it passes almost beyond the realm of mere theory, when coupled with his look and manner, as I suggested that hypothetical Scotchman, which I did on purpose to test him. Such excited interest as he showed could only result from some strong personal feeling upon the point. He will go to Mr. Haigg. Mr. Haigg is already primed by me. I shall hear the result.”

“It would be a thousand pities he should be successful.”

“He will not be. I intend father to buy the place for me. Should he prove restive, we will buy it ourselves.”

“We?” and he put his hand under her chin, and smiled lovingly down upon her upturned face.

“Yes, we. Jointly and unitedly, and any other ‘ly’ which may so mix everything up in a hopeless tangle, that when we quarrel and separate, the lawyers may be able to claw away the bulk of all we possess, and leave us to spend our declining years in well-earned poverty. But I should prefer father buying it, and I think he will, when the idea is suggested to him. I am going now to write to him about it. Of one thing I am determined,” and she clenched her little hands with vicious energy, “that horrible reptile Buller shall not get Wycherley Court, if I have to pawn my watch to prevent it.”

“You little wild cat! Is that determination prompted by love or hate?”

“By a mixture of the two. The strongest of all incentives to action. Is he not a villain? And did not my star of bliss first rise upon me in this very house?”

Little Mrs. Buller was almost animated when she and her husband left the house; the mere atmosphere of a place in which she was received as a welcome guest, whose presence afforded pleasure to anyone, was quite inspiring. But long before they reached the gateway she had sunk back into her ordinary faded insipidity—her unwonted sprightliness quenched in a moment by the ferocious snarl which greeted her first innocent remark. Mrs. Lawrence had darted a poisoned arrow into the very midst of Mr. Buller’s hopeful anticipations, and he was not disposed to seek consolation in his wife’s harmless prattle. Could Mrs. Moss but have divined the sentiments of each as she watched them advancing towards the gateway, amidst the quivering lights

and shadows of the elm avenue, she would perhaps have thought her wrongs in their reception at the Court fully avenged.

Mr. Buller's first impulse on reaching home was to smoke a cigar in savage gloom, and rail at all living things, save his own cruelly wronged self. The capricious changes of fortune, to which he had been of late the victim, were not, he felt, a just award to a man who never for one moment faltered in his ardent pursuit of his own aggrandisement. How could any man be prepared to steer his course when the wind veered thus from fair to foul, or foul to fair, in this shifty and uncertain manner? To the harassing anxieties of the great drainage entanglement had succeeded the unexpected stroke of good fortune which had resulted in throwing the Wycherley mortgages into his hands; that great success had been followed, and to some extent turned to his disadvantage, by the scandals of the churchwarden contest, which had, he knew perfectly well, left upon him a certain stain that it would take long to efface. He felt, however, that he had steered his bark through that troubled sea with consummate skill, and immediately after he had found ample consolation for the worst anxieties thereby entailed upon him in that sudden favourable turn in his fortunes, of which the rector had heard in Willesbury. He had never doubted the ultimate success of that speculation; but he had not expected it to come so soon as it had done. From the moment he had received the welcome news, he had felt fully assured that within the course of a year or two at most he would be well able to cope with any purchaser in

the matter of Wycherley Court, and had been indulging with serene satisfaction in visions of future glory. And now—perhaps at this very moment—all chance of achieving the great success for which he had toiled so unremittingly was passing from him. He dashed down his half-smoked cigar at the thought, and burst into a torrent of universal malediction.

Then he acted upon his second impulse, which was at once to seek Haigg, who lived about a mile away from Monksford, occupying a small farm belonging to the Wycherley estate. His quest for information in that quarter had never been singularly successful, but as mortgagee he had rights which, as he expressed it to himself, not even that cursed close-fisted Scotchman could deny. Doubtless, as Mrs. Lawrence had mentioned a Scotchman, Haigg was at the bottom of this confounded business.

“I’ve just been calling at the Court, Haigg,” he said, dashing into his subject, “and Mrs. Lawrence mentioned to me that some Scotch gentleman is in treaty with Mr. Wycherley for the purchase of this property.”

“Indeed, Mr. Buller?”

“Yes. It is a most extraordinary thing that I have heard nothing of it, being mortgagee.”

“Have you really heard nothing?”

“Not a word.”

“That seems strange.”

“Deuced strange, and most ungentleman-like conduct in Mr. Wycherley. I never inserted any clause in our agreement respecting any time for

which the mortgages should stand. A wealthy purchaser might choose to pay them off at once. It's a confoundedly losing matter, sometimes, I can tell you, to have capital thrown upon your hands just at an inconvenient moment."

"So I should imagine."

"Well but, Haigg, what does it all mean? Who is the man?"

"I can't give you any information, Mr. Buller. You must apply to Mr Wycherley."

"But, hang it, you must know about it; and you must know that, as mortgagee, I have a right to information on such a point."

"You are quite wrong in supposing I must know. I hear very little of what goes on."

"Nonsense, Haigg. It's all very well to be so close; just like you confounded Scotchmen. But, as steward, you must have constant communication with Mr Wycherley. What do you do about rent collections, and all sorts of business of that kind?"

"What has that to do with the mortgages, Mr. Buller?"

"Nothing. Only I want to find out how I am to get information which concerns me."

"Oh, I see. That I can easily tell you. All letters to Mr. Wycherley go to his bankers in London. I will give you the address. You can easily write to him."

Mr. Octavius Buller took the address, with a very ill grace, and sulkily wishing the steward good morning, turned his steps homeward, his maledictions finding now a definite object on which to expend themselves.

“That cursed fellow knows more than he chooses to say, or he would not be so desperately close. There’s something up, I’ll be bound,” and then he entered into a careful mental calculation of the dead loss he should incur if, within perhaps a year, or a little more, of his taking up the Wycherley mortgages, they should be paid off, without his having the faintest chance of securing the ends which he had in view when he advanced the money at a low rate of interest. He had sold out some capital at a slight loss; he had lost the chance of a particularly good investment; to say nothing of some thousands standing for a year or more, at very small interest. He estimated his losses, actual and hypothetical, at some hundreds, and cursed all creation afresh right heartily as he made his way home.

Mrs. Buller had an evil time of it for the next few days. Not even the most cheering accounts of the prospects of his long locked-up investment could soothe the perturbed spirit of her lord. It seemed to him that the fine old trees in the Wycherley Park had clothed themselves in especially splendid foliage, and that the stately avenue, with its venerable gateway, developed some fresh charm every time he passed it. He had never known, until that moment, how entirely he had learned to believe that he should one day pass and repass along that avenue as its possessor. And yet, in the midst of all his mortification and disappointment, he called himself a fool for caring so much about the matter. Would he not ere very long be a rich man? and were there not infinite numbers of places always in the market which

would suit him quite as well? All quite true, as doubtless there were many vineyards in the neighbourhood of Jezreel, possessing equal [attractions with that of Naboth, which might have easily been secured; and yet the king fretted himself ill because he was denied possession of that particular piece of ground. Mr. Octavius Buller seemed like to be in the same case as far as the fretting went. There was no chance certainly of passive little Mrs. Buller figuring in the affair in the character of Jezebel.

Mr. Buller at once wrote a letter to Mr Wycherley, to request an explanation of the report he had heard; little suspecting that he had walked deliberately into a snare artfully tendered to him, and betrayed his own designs to the very person who would feel most satisfaction in thwarting them; and never dreaming that his own letter would be the first suggestion to Mr. Wycherley of the advantages he might derive from the sale of a place at which he felt now, more strongly than ever, that he would never care to live. Such results from any line of conduct in another man, Mr. Buller would have held to be incontrovertible evidence that he was a consummate ass. Could he have foreseen them in his own case, he would only have regarded them as proofs of malignant animosity on the part of fortune.





CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MR. BULLER IS SNARED BY THE WORK OF HIS OWN HANDS.

COULD we only have laid bare before us the contents of all the letters which travel in peaceful companionship, packed closely together in one capacious sack, what a tangled web of rival scheming, contradictory striving, and incompatible projecting would be laid bare to our bewildered gaze! Could the entire postal communication of the whole kingdom, for one single day, be made public, it is hardly too much to assert that the whole fabric of society would fall in ruins with a mighty crash.

For some three months Mr. Octavius Buller was doomed to wait in anxious uncertainty for an answer to his letter to Mr. Wycherley, who was, in the first place, by no means in the habit of attending to business letters at all, especially when their contents were of no particular consequence to himself, and who, in the second place, did not receive the letter for some considerable time after it was written, in consequence of abnormal personal arrangements on his own part.

Lewis Gwynne had not been too much absorbed in getting Rose Playfair safely started for home to miss the opportunity of taking some slight revenge on the man who had so cruelly deceived her. He had entered and left the hotel, himself unnoticed, directing her to leave in the evening on foot, with only a small bag, and meet him at an appointed spot, making his own arrangements regarding the rest of her belongings. When, therefore, Mr. Wycherley returned, after a few days' absence, he was not a little startled to find his victim had disappeared, no one knew exactly how, or when, on the very same day on which he had left himself; and that the following morning a person, wearing the appearance of a respectable travelling maid, had come, produced an order from her for all her boxes to be delivered to her, and after settling all charges due, had departed, without affording the slightest clue to the mystery.

This extraordinary occurrence had greatly disturbed Mr. Wycherley's equanimity. He would have been well enough pleased to be rid of the girl, of whom he was already weary, but he did not like this method of riddance; it suggested complications in which his own position might possibly prove unpleasant. So after some reflection he had resolved, for a time at least, to preserve his incognito, and keep himself, in a general sense, out of the way. His letters, consequently, did not reach him very regularly, and Mr. Buller was doomed to all the cruel agonies of suspense.

Neither, when Mr. Wycherley did at last receive the letter, did it immediately secure any attention at his hands. He read it, laughed, called Mr. Buller

“a bumptious blockhead,” thrust it into a pocket, and forgot all about it. He was in excellent spirits. His forced seclusion had exercised a most beneficial influence on his finances, and some weeks after Rose’s abrupt disappearance he had entrusted to a faithful ally in England the task of making some inquiries concerning her, which step had resulted in his becoming aware of the fact that she had returned to her friends, and was living in seclusion at Wycherley Court, under the protection of the rector of Monksford and his wife.

“Strange,” he muttered to himself, “that she should have run away from me, to find a home in my own house.” It might be strange, but it was satisfactory; the circumstances seemed to promise him immunity from all unpleasant results of his little escapade, and he held himself an uncommonly lucky dog to have got so well and quietly quit of the girl, who had speedily cured him of his infatuated passion by her own absolute incapacity to sink to his level.

On receipt of this satisfactory intelligence, he had emerged from his comparative seclusion, and was just beginning to indemnify himself for its tedium by a plunge into a more congenial life, when he received and thrust aside Mr. Buller’s letter. For a few weeks he enjoyed himself thoroughly, after his own fashion; but then a very dark cloud suddenly descended upon his fortunes. He had always been an inveterate, and, generally, a successful gambler; but at last a run of ill-luck set in, and finally, playing one night perhaps all the more recklessly for that very reason, he lost to such an amount that he found himself the next morning in a very unpleasant position.

Money he must in some way obtain at once. His experiences in such transactions were chiefly Parisian, and not altogether agreeable; and as he reflected on this fact, and cursed his unwonted ill-luck, the remembrance of Mr. Octavius Buller, and the transactions with him which had proved so easy and pleasant, suddenly came to his recollection.

"The very fellow," he muttered to himself, half aloud, beginning, as is often the case with cosmopolitans in language, to think in English, as his thought took an English turn. "Surely, I had some letter from him lately," and he began a general searching of pockets, and at length lighted upon Mr. Buller's epistle and glanced over it. His face assumed a very thoughtful expression as he did so.

Mr. Buller did not appear nearly such a bumptious blockhead as on first perusal of the letter. Why not sell Wycherley Court? He had not thought of doing so, until the mention of this absurd rumour had suggested the idea; but was it not a good idea? The place was not now the mouldy old chateau of his first visit, and visions had flitted through his mind, when first he had gone to England in the previous year, of setting up there in the character of an English squire, on the solid foundation of his long line of ancestry and Kate Tollmache's large fortune. That idea was of course exploded, and without some such substantial lure he had no strong predilection for the situation. Now, moreover, he felt strongly that Wycherley Court would hardly be a desirable residence for him under any circumstances. Then why not sell it? Mr. Tollmache's tenancy had greatly raised its market value, and

many English acquaintances had assured him it was a place for which he would easily be able to secure a fancy price, if ever he should feel inclined to dispose of his ancestral acres. Verily Mr. Buller had been cajoled by the arts of the rector's wife into suggesting a train of thought by no means favourable to his own purposes.

After long reflection, Mr. Wycherley's conclusion was, that under present circumstances he would not in any way increase the burdens on his English property, but would manage to raise what money he immediately required in some other way. And then he wrote a short note to Mr. Buller, in a friendly tone—thinking it prudent to keep him in good humour—to assure him that the rumour which had reached him was wholly groundless; that he, Wycherley, had no thought of selling his property, and had certainly had no offer of any sort for it made to him.

Now this very letter, which relieved the anxieties of Mr. Buller, and restored his joyous confidence in the rising star of his fortunes, actually travelled in the same sack, and was carried by the letter carrier in the same packet with one from Mr. Tollmache to his daughter, in which occurred these words:—

“I could not answer about the purchase of Wycherley sooner, for your letter was accidentally delayed. If you like to have the place, and Wycherley will sell, I am quite ready to buy it. I should feel a satisfaction in preventing such an old family property from falling into the hands of a vulgar fellow like Buller, which would incline me to

go a long way to outbid him. Such men ought to be content with fine red brick and plate glass, all the latest improvements in electric bells and hot-water service, and a large field dotted with very small saplings, and dubbed 'The Park.' I shall, however, be home in the course of a fortnight, or thereabout, then we can set about the consideration of this matter in earnest."

Alas! for the hapless Octavius Buller! The bark of his fortunes was certainly riding on a treacherous sea. No sooner was one squall safely weathered and his sails swelling in a favouring breeze, beneath a sunny sky, than troubled waters and lowering clouds began to appear on the horizon. Hard measure for a man whose single-hearted devotion to his own interests never, by day or night, flagged for one moment. Too unremitting application to one subject is credited with producing an injurious effect upon the intellectual powers. Perhaps the acuteness of his perceptions in this particular direction had been blunted by too incessant absorption in this one all-important consideration.

By the time that Mr. Tollmache was driving up the old avenue, under a shower of rapidly-falling autumn leaves, Rose Playfair had been established for some weeks at the rectory, a step which, on the whole, failing the more proper course of her relegation to absolute oblivion, Monksford approved. It had a far better moral effect, and was also much more satisfactory to individual feeling, to see her placed on the lower level of an insignificant curate's domestic life, rather than shrined amidst all those somewhat jealously-eyed luxuries and refinements

of patrician splendour to which free access was not accorded to people of most irreproachable character.

Rose was sobered, and sometimes very sad; especially did the thought of her dishonourable conduct to George Huddleston often cause her to shed bitter tears; but she was not altogether unhappy. Her weak pliant nature took its tone still from the strongest influence under which it found itself. Had she fallen into different hands, it would have been no difficult task to mould her into a sentimental Magdalen, undermining all chance of a healthy moral reaction by persistent cultivation of morbid hysterical penitence. Imbued with conventional moral theories, dread of the future before her, would probably have prevented her from ever leaving Mr. Wycherley, had he continued to treat her with affection. Desperation alone had driven her to face the tender mercies of social morality. But when Mrs. Lawrence, following unhesitatingly her own bold, fearless reasoning to its legitimate conclusion, had plainly pointed out to her that, considering her very clear perception of her mother's sentiments, the heaviest charge which could be brought against her was that of very dishonourable treatment of the man whom she had promised to marry, and that for the painful position in which she found herself she was only so far responsible, that she owed it to an act of monstrous folly, in placing implicit faith in the promises of a man of whose character she had been warned, she very soon began to perceive that her true fault was one very easily condoned by the world, while of that for

which she was held a pariah, she was wholly guiltless. This first overturning of conventional moral theories, and readjustment of things on a solid foundation of truth, was very bewildering, and might, in a stronger character, have been attended by dangerous results in the direction of either morbid cynicism or reckless defiance. Rose only brightened up under the growing sense that she was not an abandoned creature, whose very presence was pollution to respectable people, and began to try, as Mrs. Lawrence constantly urged, to look forward hopefully to the future. Only she felt more troubled about George than she had hitherto done.

By a fortunate accident, a pathway, leading from the churchyard across the park, and then through fields and woods in the direction of Willesbury, gave her easy and secluded access to the lane behind her father's house, so that she could pass and repass without having to run the gauntlet of Monksford criticism. In that immaculate town she had never been seen, save in Mrs. Lawrence's close carriage. Mrs. Playfair, with tears in her eyes, told the rector's wife that her darling Rose had become a perfect angel; that she seemed to have no thought save how to help her; and did more for her in a week than of yore she had done in a month. Reassured respecting the dangers of being obliged to have her at home, and happy in the fact that young Yardley had actually proposed to and been accepted by Alice, and, moreover, stoutly defended Rose, declaring that she should live with Alice and him if she liked, and breathing awful threats against

anyone who should dare to say a word against her in his presence, poor Mrs. Playfair felt as if the silver lining of her dark cloud was overflowing its edges on all sides, and flooding it with a deluge of brightness.

Rose, slightly pensive and with an air and manner faintly tinged, even in her brightest moments, with sadness, yet wholly devoid of moroseness or gloom, was, as Mrs. Lawrence had expressed it, simply exquisite; and endowed with a more subtle, if less brilliant charm than in the palmiest days of her girlish beauty. That she was wholly unconscious of the fact only enhanced its attraction, and evening after evening found Mr. Smithson, on one pretence or another, a visitor at the rectory. The curate and his wife played their part well, and Rose, ever retaining a grateful remembrance of kindness to her parents in their great distress, treated him with a cordial friendliness, which was just the very best medium for her becoming acquainted with his sterling good qualities. The rector's wife, quietly looking on in discreet neutrality, smiled to herself, and bided her time; only saying to Mrs. Huddlestone,—

“I think you may safely arrange for your son's return home next summer.”

“And so you really wish me to buy this place, do you?” Mr. Tollmache said to his daughter, the morning after his return home.

“I do, indeed, very much wish it,” she replied. “I should like very much to have it; and still more to frustrate the designs of Mr. Buller.”

“Well, I had thought of it myself. I will write to Fosbury to-morrow, and tell him to put himself in

communication with that precious rascal on the subject."

The lawyer thus instructed, wrote at once to Mr. Wycherley. The idea of improving his dilapidated fortunes by the sale of his English property had been very often in the thoughts of the latter since it had first been suggested to him by Mr. Buller's letter. He would certainly never live there, so where was the use of the place to him? If he retained it he must let it, for the sake of the income, so he could not even visit it occasionally. His income was terribly crippled by heavy interest for large sums raised to meet his debts, and this last run of ill-luck at the gambling table had greatly straitened his resources. On the most moderate calculation, the sale of Wycherley would cover all his liabilities, and yet leave him a very considerably larger clear income than he possessed at the moment; and he would be no longer subjected to vexatious demands for estate outlay, and the reiterated warnings of Haigg, that if a more liberal expenditure under this heading was not shortly granted, he must be prepared to face serious deterioration in the value of his property. All these considerations had well prepared the way for Mr. Tollmache's offer, and very brief reflection was sufficient to induce him to write and express his willingness to enter into negotiations for the sale of Wycherley. And no bird of the air carried the voice, no winged messenger whispered the matter in the ears of Mr. Buller, daily rejoicing in the satisfactory explosion of the rumour which had for so long a period disturbed his peace of mind. Ever more,—from his drawing-room window he

actually watched, with much complacency, surveyors, under the guidance of Haigg, making a careful survey of the Wycherley Park, remarking afterwards to his wife,—

“Haigg has been busy with some surveyors in the park to-day. That ass Tollmache is going to lay out more money on the place, I suppose, in some improvements. Well, it’s an old saying, that a fool and his money are soon parted; but I shouldn’t have thought there was any man fool enough to spend money, as he has done, on a place that isn’t his own.”

“But I suppose, now, they’ll take a long lease of it, and always live there,” she replied. “There’s no other place near that would suit Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence.”

“Then it strikes me they’ll have to build a house. They haven’t four years’ lease to run, and I’m strongly of opinion they’ll not have a chance of renewing.”

“Oh! why not, Octavius? Mr. Wycherley could never think of living there himself.”

“By that time Mr. Wycherley will have to consult other people respecting his proceedings, or I am greatly mistaken,” replied Mr. Buller superbly.

A monotonous calm had settled down upon Monksford. The marriage of Ned Corbett and Mrs. Campbell during the autumn had afforded scope for a little chatter. And Rose Playfair’s establishment at the rectory some time before Mr. Tollmache’s return had provided an opportunity for a few sarcastic remarks. Mr. Tollmache was probably a little less Quixotic than his daughter, and had a

little more respect for the proprieties of social life. At which suggestions Mrs. Corbett had sneered contemptuously.

"All very well for Mrs. Lawrence to set up for eccentricity and setting other people's opinions at defiance. But you don't suppose, do you, for all her championship of that girl, she's not wide enough awake, after the specimen she has had of her proclivities, to keep her out of Mr. Tollmache's way. It would have been very awkward if she and the rector had been obliged suddenly to turn out, and there's no denying the girl is wonderfully attractive now. More so than ever. She has made good use of her time in Paris, I can see. Mr. Tollmache isn't such a very old man. It would be a tremendous smash for Mrs. Lawrence to find her father's house no longer a respectable home, and such a scandal too. Nursing a viper with a vengeance."

All her hearers cried out "Hush! hush!" and agreed this was really going too far, and forthwith called upon all their friends to tell them of the dreadful things Mrs. Corbett had been saying.

"It is just like her. It is quite shocking. But she rather likes to shock people. And after all, when you come to think of it, such things have happened, and the girl is certainly very pretty."

"I am sure," replied Mrs. Collier, "I heartily wish she was well out of Monksford. I quite dread my girls meeting her."

And after frequent discussion of the subject, although it was still avowed that Mrs. Corbett was really too bad, there was a distinct impression afloat that Rose Playfair was a more dangerous

and unprincipled girl than had even been suspected.

In spite, however, of these little moral "pick-me-ups," it was dull in Monksford. There was no appearance of subserviency on the rector's part. No indication of any mortifications which could be proclaimed to serve him right for placing himself in such a false position. No relaxing in his professional activity which might savour of addiction to worldliness and dissipation. He rode very often with his father-in-law, and was not very often seen in company with his wife. About the utmost which could be remarked was that they seemed very independent of each other. But then there were so many indications of most cordial union between them, that the remark having clearly no under current of invidious meaning fell flat and uninteresting.

Mrs. Lawrence was beginning herself to feel some little anxiety and uncertainty regarding her next step. That Mr. Smithson was falling in with her designs in the most satisfactory manner she had not a moment's doubt, still he made no actual and tangible sign, and there was the great difficulty.

"I fully believe," she said to her husband, "that he makes no sign because he feels he cannot afford to marry, especially a girl his marriage with whom would necessitate all the expense of a move. And yet it is a singularly difficult case in which to suggest the possibility of any aid. It would seem so much like offering him a bribe to take her off our hands. I cannot see what to do."

"A pretty clear indication that you had better do nothing. Wait, and see what happens. If he be

really very much in love, he will commit himself sooner or later. Perhaps they will go up a steep hill."

"There isn't one for them to go up!" she said pathetically.

"Not actually, but metaphorically. Wait, and you will see."

It was drawing near Christmas, when, one afternoon, Rose, who had been spending the day with her mother, started for the rectory just as the dusk was beginning to fall, choking back with difficulty, until she was clear of the house, the heavy sobs which were struggling to burst forth. Mrs. Playfair was not a keenly sympathetic woman, and it did not occur to her, when Rose came to help her in making and altering a quantity of clothes for the children, that the subject of Alice's marriage, wedding clothes, presents, and the nice house Mr. Yardley was going to give the young couple, was one which might have a painful ring in it for the daughter who, less than two years since, had been herself the principal in such discussions. Rose had borne up bravely, and had answered, "Oh, yes, mamma, I think so," quite firmly, when her mother had suggested that a plain white silk and tulle veil would be the proper dress for a quiet wedding.

"And then, my dear," Mrs. Playfair had continued, "I was thinking, Alice should have a riding-habit. The Yardleys keep horses; it might be useful. But they are so dreadfully expensive. Now there is yours. A little altering would make it fit Alice beautifully, and I don't suppose you'll ever want it. It's a pity, too, to let a riding-habit lie by, the moths

are sure to get into it. What do you think, my dear?"

There had been a moment's pause; but then Rose had said quite steadily, though with a little stiffness in her voice,—

"I think it is an admirable thought, mamma. Let Alice have it, by all means. I shall never want it."

Very soon after this, she had remarked that the dusk was falling, and she must go, and had kissed her mother, and said good-bye quite cheerfully, so that when Doctor Playfair came in, his wife told him that darling Rose was really in excellent spirits.

Rose's tears fell fast when she found herself in the lonely lane. Her mother had, all unconsciously, repeated so many expressions which she had heard from her when her own marriage was under discussion, that the past seemed to be brought most painfully into vivid contrast with the present. Not two years since she had been the heroine of the hour—the envied bride elect—the smiling recipient of charming presents and flattering attentions, rejoicing in a brilliant present, and a glowing future! And now! she was not one-and-twenty. It did seem hard to look forward to a colourless, neutral sort of life, only devoid of actual hardship through the bounty of those on whom she had no recognised claim. Then, that question of the riding-habit—it was but a trifle, but it seemed so distinctly to say,—
"The natural pleasures of the young are not for you. You have no longer either part or lot in the amusements and recreations suitable for them. Renounce all claim at once."

"Poor mamma! she did not mean to pain me," she

said to herself, "and I have brought it on myself; but, oh! it is very lonely, and hard to bear." And then she sobbed with renewed violence, burying her face in her handkerchief, against the post of a stile she had just reached.

"Miss Playfair! Good heavens! what has happened?" said an anxious voice, close to her.

Rose started violently, and disclosed her tear-stained face to Mr. Smithson, who, walking down a narrow lane, between high hedges, which cut across the pathway Rose was pursuing, had come upon her suddenly, and unexpectedly to both.

"I beg your pardon for intruding," he said, colouring, and hesitating. "I did not see you until I was close to you. I—I am so distressed to see you in such trouble. I—I—hope nothing painful has occurred."

"Oh, no," she replied, trying to smile faintly, and feeling instantly in some measure soothed by the keen interest displayed in both his tone and manner. "It is nothing. Only some painful thoughts unintentionally aroused."

"You have suffered so much," he exclaimed, almost indignantly. "Who can be so cruelly thoughtless as to cause you pain, even unintentionally?"

She looked at him in startled surprise. It was the first allusion he had ever made to her past disasters; the first hint to her of his sentiments on the subject.

"I have only myself to thank for that," she said at last. "I have no right to expect to be always spared every possible reminder. Besides, how could it be? One could hardly tell oneself what train of thought a trifle may rouse."

“People should be careful, those at least who know how cruelly you have suffered. Strangers, of course, may often cause you pain most unintentionally.”

This from an outsider, while she was smarting under the pain unthinkingly caused by her own mother! Rose’s memory could bring up before her many remarks under which she had winced with a sudden sense of pain; but a rapid sweep through all its chambers at that moment could find no charge of the sort against Mr. Smithson. If the fact had ever struck her before she would have laid it to the score of accident. Could it be the result of design? The thought inclined her to speak more confidentially than she had ever before done to him, though they had had many a long chat, and she had been gradually learning to regard him as a friend.

“Most people would rather say, I had brought all I have suffered on myself, and ought to be grateful for the smallest crumbs of kindness, without dreaming of exacting thoughtful consideration.”

“Most people would be fools, and liars to boot, then,” he vehemently replied. “Are you— But I have no right to speak on the subject to you, Miss Playfair. I am allowing the deep sympathy I feel for you to lead me into an indiscretion as great as that which I condemn. Pray forgive me.”

“Oh, there is no need!” she exclaimed, bursting into tears afresh. “You have been so good and kind—so kind to my poor father and mother, and so good to me; you do not know how deeply I feel it. I have so little to look forward to. Life looks so

sad and dreary. You do not know how soothing words of kindness are."

"Why should life look sad and dreary?" he asked, in a tone which trembled a little.

"Because it must be very lonely and desolate. What am I to do? I cannot always remain a pensioner on the bounty of friends whose kindness I do not deserve, and I have had no training to fit me to do anything for myself. Mrs. Lawrence is always telling me to look forward hopefully, and I do try. But I cannot help sometimes feeling that the future looks very dark."

"Then let me share it with you, and lighten it's load. Rose, dear Rose! I have loved you long. I loved you before you were engaged to Huddleston, but how could I dare to tell you so? I am a poor man, and Heaven knows my prospects are not very bright. But if you can say that you will love me, and will risk sharing my future as my wife, dear Rose, if it be in the power of mortal man to prevent it you shall never regret that you have trusted to me. And what cannot a man accomplish for the sake of the woman he loves?"

Rose recoiled with an almost terrified start. "Your wife!" She murmured, turning very pale. "Would you make *me* your wife?"

"Right joyously. Before any other woman upon earth, and find my greatest happiness in toiling for you. Rose, dear Rose, can it be possible that you hold me such a brute, you fear I could for a moment think that the villainy of the greatest scoundrel upon earth has thrown any slur upon you? I have no fine speeches with which to woo you, I am but a

rough fellow ; but you have learned only too bitterly, my poor darling, what they are worth. Only say you will be my wife, and I will fearlessly ask you, every year that passes, whether you have ever had cause to repent that you trusted to me ?”

She made no reply. Her voice was choked with tears, but she made a half movement towards him. He took her in his arms, and gently soothed her with low loving words, and knew that he had won a wife whom scathing experience had taught to know the value of the honest love of an honest man.

Thus Mrs. Lawrence's perplexities came to a sudden end, and she was able, in an innocently artful conversation with Mr. Smithson, to explain that it had been all along her full intention to provide in some way for Rose Playfair ; who, she could never forget, had first attracted Mr. Wycherley's notice through being in her company. We know that this was a little blunder on Mrs. Lawrence's part, but it served its end too neatly to be regretted. Under the circumstances, she explained, considering the immense advantage to Rose, arising from a suitable marriage, it appeared to her that this end could not be more satisfactorily attained than by the purchase, for himself, of a practice in some distant part of the county, which would render it possible for the marriage to take place at once. She waived his expressions of gratitude, with true tact and courtesy, by dwelling on the extreme difficulty she had foreseen in making any suitable permanent arrangement for Rose, and the immense consequent relief of seeing her thus provided with a home, and

the protection of a husband with whom she had every prospect of happiness.

Thus the matter was settled. The practice was to be secured as soon as possible, and the marriage, which was to be kept a profound secret, was then to take place privately, in London. Mrs. Playfair felt as if heaven itself were opening upon her; and only the most urgent representations on Mrs. Lawrence's part induced her to forego the gratification of imparting to good Mrs. Cripps the joyful news of how soon her encouraging prophecies had been fulfilled.

Rose was quietly, but thoroughly happy; more happy than anyone can perhaps fully understand, who has never experienced the relief, to a weak, pliant nature, of finding itself rescued from the dread horror of the prospect of having to face the battle of life alone, and provided with a strong prop to which to cling. "I know we shall be very poor, for a time at least," she said to Mrs. Lawrence, "but what of that? I have been well used to pinching and screwing. And I used to think poverty the most dreadful of all misfortunes. How different things look now!"

There were more things than poverty which wore a very different aspect to Rose Playfair in those days from what they had worn of yore. One day, when Mr. Smithson had crossed the park with her and Mrs. Lawrence from the rectory, and had wished them goodbye at the door of the Court, she stood watching him for a moment as he walked away; and then laying her hand on Kate's arm she said, with a half sad smile,—

"I am not quite so silly as I was. He is not a whit better dressed, or more careful of his appearance than George. But I never think of it."

"You will make him a good wife, dear Rose, which is more than I think you would have done to George Huddleston."

She shuddered a little.

"Oh, you do not know all! all the mad foolish notions I had in my head. It has all been the greatest mercy for him. There would have been sad unhappiness, perhaps a terrible disaster. Do you know, I have flown from one extreme to another. I almost shudder now at a dashing appearance and fascinating manner. But Mrs. Lawrence—" and she paused.

"What, my love?"

"I think I should like to see George just once again. I should like to ask him to forgive me all the trouble I have caused him. When is he coming home?"

"He will not be home until after you are married and settled far away, I hope. Believe me, dear, it is better so. A meeting would only cause needless pain to both. No one will rejoice more over your fortunate lot than George Huddleston; and some day, perhaps, you will meet again. But at present it is better not."





CHAPTER XXXIX.

FINALLY SHOWS THAT PROVIDENCE OCCASIONALLY
MISSES OPPORTUNITIES.

BEFORE the spring came round again the moral sense of Monksford was relieved from its oppressive burden. The dreadful and contaminating spectacle of prosperous iniquity was removed from its midst. Rose Playfair was known to have gone to London; but that was all. It was said that Mrs. Lawrence had managed something for her; no one knew exactly what, but they all felt very virtuous and triumphant. Had not their unflinching performance of their duty to society brought Mrs. Lawrence to her senses, and taught her that Monksford was not the place where lax morality would be tolerated for a moment? It was not for some considerable time that the fact leaked out that Rose Playfair had become the wife of Mr. Smithson, who was practising as a surgeon in a busy manufacturing town far away from Monksford, and making a good and yearly increasing income. The means by which he had obtained that practice never transpired, so a glorious opportunity for a sweeping denunciation of all concerned in any

such disgraceful transaction as the giving and receiving of a bribe to marry a girl whom it was desirable to get quietly rid of, was for ever lost to the rigid moralists of the town.

Towards the end of the winter, also, the dread thunderbolt of unmerited failure fell with a most unexpected crash on the hapless head of Mr Octavius Buller. He did not often change colour, but he turned very pale as he read, one morning, a brief letter from Mr. Tollmache's lawyer, informing him that his client having become by purchase the possessor of the whole of the Wycherley Court estate, wished at once to clear off all mortgages on the property; and that he should be glad to hear from Mr. Buller on the subject.

It was the deepest plunge into disaster, from the highest summit of good fortune, Mr. Octavius Buller had ever been doomed to take, and he reached the bottom of the abyss in a very shattered mental and moral condition. He did not, like the petulant King of Israel, take to his bed and turn his face to the wall; perhaps because he had no hopes of aid from any high-handed Jezebel. But he swore a great deal, and conducted himself at home with a savage ferocity which astonished even his wife. A dim suspicion that he had been made a fool of by the rector's wife began to arise in his mind, and that was gall and wormwood to him. He fancied he detected a malicious twinkle in Mrs. Lawrence's eyes whenever he met her, and looking upon her and the rector as the virtual possessors of Wycherley Court, the sight of them passing in and out of the old gateway which would never own him as its

master, would no more allow him to rejoice in his well-invested capital, and constantly increasing fortune, than would the sight of Mordecai the Jew, let Haman enjoy his overflowing honours. He had but one poor mite of consolation—he had kept his projects faithfully concealed within his own breast, so had not the mortification of figuring before his fellow-townsmen as a foiled and disappointed man.

The old fable of the sour grapes reproduces itself in many varied forms. Where, Mr. Buller argued with himself in his splenetic disappointment, would be the use, after all, of a county house and county standing to a man tied to such a wife as his, who would always look like the housekeeper, and be a perpetual, irritating eyesore to him? So, filled with a sense of being an ill-used and deeply injured man, he relinquished his projects, and buying a convenient piece of land near Monksford, built himself a resplendent villa, fitted up, as Mr. Tollmache had described it, with all the latest improvements, and surrounded by a perfect forest of saplings; and, in time, drove into Monksford daily to business in a dashing brougham, much becrested in all available places, with a high-stepping horse, glittering in extensively plated harness.

One of Rose Playfair's handsomest wedding presents, though of course a late one in arriving, came from George Huddleston, accompanied by a note, so full of frank manly feeling, that she had a hearty cry over it, with her arms round her husband's neck.

About a year after their marriage, he one day placed a paper before her, and silently pointed to a

notice of the marriage of Victor Wycherley, Esq., to Clarissa, second daughter of Sir Myles Jarvis of Eaglescliff.

“Oh, poor thing! poor thing!” was all Rose said.

Clarissa had had a small fortune left to her by a distant relative, and Lady Jarvis was radiant. “My dear Clarissa is quite too happy,” she wrote to Lady Clanraven. “They will live almost entirely abroad; which is just what she likes. Victor’s devotion is quite perfect. Poor dear fellow! he has suffered so much. The dreadful entanglement in which he was involved by the arts of that horrible girl has almost ruined his worldly prospects. But Clarissa will be all a wife should be to him, and they will find abundant happiness in their mutual affection. I hear that your eccentric niece plays the part of rector’s wife to perfection, is quite a triton among the minnows, a little autocrat among all those town-people. We never see her. After her extraordinary patronage of that abandoned girl, I really felt it impossible to keep up any acquaintance. I feel much for Mr. Tollmache. He must, I fear, find himself sadly shut out from all his old friends.”

Lady Jarvis forgot to mention that the initiative in the matter of dropping acquaintance was taken by the Court; Mr. Tollmache having stoutly declared that not even under his daughter’s protection would he enter the house at Eaglescliff, or allow Lady Jarvis to get a footing within the walls of Wycherley Court. “You are not half the protection, now,” he said, “which you were before you were married. Then you were inevitable in your father’s house, now a separation of establishments is possible.”

Rose and George Huddleston did meet once more when, some years after her marriage, she came to stay with her sister Alice, in order to be present at Lucy's wedding. Then George brought a bright, handsome, sensible looking wife to call upon her, who greeted her with frank cordiality, and earnestly pressed her to visit them. And Rose, seizing both his hands as they parted, looked up into his face with tearful eyes, and said,—“Dear George! I am so happy.”

All the Playfair girls married well, and, save the death of their eldest son, a fine promising lad, just as he was preparing to enter upon his medical studies, no further misfortunes marred their subsequent prosperity. Mrs. Playfair, a handsomely dressed elderly lady, was able to drive about, visiting her daughters, in her own carriage. Their good fortune was felt in Monksford not to be what might have been expected; and though it was spoken of as a great mercy for them, poor things! it was in a tone which seemed rather to imply some doubt whether Providence had not fallen into an error in missing such a fine opportunity for practical illustration of the inseparable connection which ought always to exist between wrong doing (especially if allied with poverty) and misfortune.

THE END.

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